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THE FRANTIC WILD MUSTANG LUNGED FURIOUSLY ON, HURLING HIS WOULD-BE CAPTOR
AGAINST STONES AND BOWLDERS IN A STUNNING AND AGONIZING WAY.

OR, The Great Mix-Up at Crescent Butte.

A Romance of the Wind River Range.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,
AUTHOR OF "TOLTEC TOM," "WARBLING WILLIAM," "THE MESMERIST SPORT," "BILLY,
THE GYPSY SPY," "SIGNAL SAM,"
"CAPTAIN CACTUS," ETC.

CHAPTER L
AN ODD SPECIMEN.
IT was a time of excitement at Crescent Butte—of feverish, but subdued excitement. The last, great mustang drive had proven a success; and an extended semicircle of mustangers was now urging the trapped animals into the net prepared for them. Few words were spoken. Each man understood his duty.

And though nerves thrilled wildly, and throats ached to give utterance to suppressed yells of exultation, almost absolute silence prevailed.

Over the flat, curved head of Crescent Butte, and many miles beyond it, rose the towering peaks of the Wind River Mountains;—for the scene of this narrative is laid in the rugged ranch country of Western Wyoming.

Crescent Ranch, lying at the foot of the odd-shaped butte that gave it its name, was devoted exclusively to the business of catching and breaking wild horses. This business is now nearly a thing of the past, although the time is not very remote when it was followed extensively in the wilder portions of the West.

The calling of a mustanger required great patience and pertinacity. Wild horses were not usually caught with a lariat, as many erroneously suppose. On the contrary, the method commonly adopted was to walk them down. For days, and even weeks, the mustangers would follow them—the design being to keep them moving and prevent them from feeding or getting water. Eventually thirst, starvation and fatigue would do their work;—when the mustangs could be driven in any direction. Then they would be corralled, or captured one by one by nooses concealed in the grass.

There were more than a hundred mustangs—splendid, spirited animals—in the drive at Crescent Butte. They were jaded, now, and dragged along with stiffened limbs and drooping heads. Behind them the mustangers pressed triumphantly, and before them gaped the wide-throated entrance to the corral into which they were being slowly urged.

Never had John Blessington, the proprietor of the Crescent Ranch, felt in higher spirits than on this occasion. That band of wild horses, thoroughly broke and subjugated as they would soon be, meant a pretty lump of money in his purse.

"Don't press them!" he commanded, in warning tones, to some excited horsemen near him. "Don't press them, or they'll break away, yet!"

The order seemed timely, for a few of the crowding mustangs—those that had come out of the drive strongest and freshest—showed decided tendencies to break away. With wild eyes flashing, nostrils dilated, and silky manes streaming and gleaming in the sun, they dashed from one side to another of the hemming semi-circle, in a state of panic and fright.

One of the men to whom John Blessington directed his words was Parker, or Park Dwight. He was a young man, scarcely out of his teens;—and perhaps because of his youth was more inclined to give way to the intense excitement that possessed him.

He dropped back in obedience to Blessington's sharp orders; but never for a moment did his keen eyes leave the mustang that had from the first attracted his attention. It was indeed a beautiful animal, and he had set his heart not only on its capture, but on its possession. It was of the number now charging frantically about and striving to break away from the inclosing horsemen.

The fact that it was still gamey and full of life pleased the young mustanger. It was proof that it had staying qualities of no mean order. The drive had been one of the longest and hardest within the memory of the men of Crescent Butte.

"Look out! There he goes!" Blessington yelled, directing his exclamations to Dwight. "Don't let him get away from you!"

The mustang had put its head down and made a bold charge for the advancing line. The sight was a glorious one. The sunlight flashed like silver from its glossy, bay coat. Its bent head, arched neck and shining eyes bespoke a desperation and fierceness of spirit not easily restrained or quelled.

It advanced with a shrill neigh that sounded not unlike a wild scream from a human throat; and in spite of the efforts made to turn and check it, broke through the line and dashed madly away.

There were other animals in the herd inclined to follow its plucky example, and to these the mustangers were compelled to give their undivided attention.

Young Dwight, however, urged his horse in hot pursuit, accepting Blessington's words as his authority for so doing.

"He sha'n't get away from me!" he declared, setting his teeth firmly and grasping the lariat ready for a cast, as he pressed the spurs sharply against his pony's flanks.

That the mustang, however great its endurance, could lead him a long chase, seemed most unlikely. For more than a week it had practically gone without water or food. This splendid

burst of speed could not be expected to last long. Therefore, Park Dwight pressed hard in its wake, confident he would soon have the lariat about its neck.

None of the other mustangs succeeded in getting away, and he was left to follow this one alone. This pleased him, for it was his desire to capture it single-handed.

"If I only can break him," he thought, as he bent forward in the deep saddle, his eyes fixed on the flying animal—"I'll have the finest horse on the range to-day! Blessington hasn't an animal that can come up to that fellow, and this will give me a chance to claim him for my own."

As he swept onward in this mad gallop, Park Dwight himself presented a handsome and spirited picture. The young man was prepossessing in appearance, and the rough costume he wore rather added to his good looks. His face was beardless, and of a dark bronze color, while, strange to say, his eyes were of the deepest and most delicate blue—not at all the eyes belonging to his dark complexion.

The pony he rode bent willingly and nobly to the work, and pressed the mustang hard. In spite of the young man's belief to the contrary the race promised to be a protracted one. The mustang ran with marvelous ease, and if it could hold its pace for an hour, it would sadly tax the speed and endurance of the pony.

Two miles were passed over in an incredibly short time. The corral, the crowding horses and excited mustangers, were left far behind. Still the buoyant mustang held its own against the animal ridden by Dwight.

"Ah!"

An exultant cry leaped to the young man's lips.

The mustang had fallen, in attempting to leap a gully, and it now ran in a limping and painful manner.

"I'm bound to get him now!" Dwight muttered, nervously swinging his lariat. "He can't get away from me, now!"

In spite of the joy that welled up in his heart at thought that the race was so near an end, he witnessed the mustang's hobbling gait with a feeling of pain. He had so set his heart on it that its injuries touched him almost as if he had received them himself.

The mustang looked back with an almost human appearance of understanding. Seemingly it realized that further attempts at escape were useless. Nevertheless, it continued on as swiftly as possible—even as a man will struggle when he knows that his efforts are in vain.

With a triumphant cry, Dwight bore down on it, swinging his *riata* round and round his head.

The advantage was now all on the side of the pony. Dwight guided it carefully past the place that had witnessed the unlucky fall of the wild horse. Then, like an arrow loosed from the bow, it swooped down on the hapless victim.

The snake-like rope shot straight from the hand of the young mustanger, and settled in a graceful coil over the crippled animal's head. The pony braced itself for the expected shock that should hurl the horse to the earth.

The shock came, but not in just the manner anticipated. There was a ripping of girths; and the saddle, with the rider, was torn from the pony's back.

It was an untoward and wholly unlooked-for accident.

As he fell, the young mustanger's feet and limbs were caught and tangled in the stirrup-leathers; and as the mustang bounded off, straining at the choking rope, Dwight was dragged at its heels!

The peril was as great as its coming was sudden and startling. It was impossible for him to extricate himself. He endeavored to get at the sheath-knife in the belt at his waist, but could not. The frantic wild mustang lunged furiously on, hurling his would-be captor against stones and boulders in a stunning and agonizing way.

He strove to utter a prayer, feeling that his last hour had come. Before he could frame even one broken sentence, the sharp report of a rifle cut the air, and the dragging motion ceased, as the mustang went down in a quivering heap.

Though his senses were reeling, Dwight tried to stagger to his feet and look about. A keen twinge of pain shot through his ankle, and he sunk back without having seen anything, the whole world seeming to spin around and flash fire like an eccentric pin-wheel.

This was but momentary; and when he again looked up he saw a queer-looking old man bending over him.

"He who fights and runs away, may live to fight another day! It's the same, I suppose, with one who chases mustangs!"

There was something like irrelevancy in the old man's words.

"It was the mustang that was trying to run away!" and Dwight again attempted to lift himself to his feet.

"He'll run again in a little while," said the old man, looking at the fallen animal. "I tried my best to kill him, but I'm not as good a shot as I once was. 'The harp that once through Tara's halls!' But you know the rest of it. The harp lost its soul of music, and old Al Ashton is losing a good deal of his youth.

Ashton's general appearance was quite as odd as his words. He was dressed shabbily in a half-bunting suit. A battered hat rested on his head, and above it waved two long eagle-feathers, dyed a deep red.

Park Dwight had once or twice seen Ashton, and had heard of him frequently, though, for all that, he had very little knowledge of him. Beyond the fact that Ashton lived near there in the hills, he knew nothing. It required no close discernment to see that the old man was not just right, mentally.

"I pulled too far ahead on him," the old man continued, speaking of the mustang, which was already recovering and striving to regain its feet. "I should have killed him, otherwise."

Dwight could see that in this he spoke truly. The ball from Ashton's heavy rifle had merely grazed the mustang's head.

It got upon its feet with a great effort; and as it did so, Ashton ran forward, whipping out a big knife.

"You are not going to kill that magnificent beast!" Dwight remonstrated, for a moment forgetting the pain that racked his ankle. "Stop there! Why should you do that?"

The old man smiled grimly as he caught the sentences. He had no intention of slaying the mustang. The unsheathed knife was for another purpose. As soon as he reached the still-dazed animal, he lifted the blade, and with one stroke severed the noose that still clung chokingly around its neck.

And the mustang, as if delighted with its freedom, scrambled limpingly away.

Dwight looked after it regretfully.

"Why did you do that?" he demanded, with a sudden burst of impatience.

Ashton struck a stagy attitude; and, cocking his head sideways, wagged it until the tall feathers shook.

"Oh, were you ne'er a school-boy? If you were, you ought to know what liberty is. That mustang thinks as much of its freedom as any school-boy that ever romped. I cut its rope to keep you from being dragged again; and now it can go!—go like the winged birds that skim the deep!"

It was useless for Dwight to protest. He was powerless to do anything to prevent the animal's escape, or even to help himself. And so he watched it limp away, and pass from sight around a curve of the hills.

CHAPTER II.

A PLEASANT SURPRISE.

THE pony that had brought the young man to that place had long since recovered from the shock occasioned by the parting of the double girths of the heavy stock-saddle, and was now quietly grazing, taking no interest in the movements of the mustang, nor in those of its late rider and his queer companion.

One thing was beginning to exercise Dwight's mind, now that he had time to think, and that was the mysterious breaking of the girths. Why had they given way so suddenly and strangely? The girths of a stock-saddle are made to withstand a tremendous strain. No ordinary wrench will rip them out or tear them loose. And he had had ample opportunity to test the strength of the ones attached to his saddle. He had held lunging steers and the wildest of wild mustangs with them.

He again essayed to rise to his feet, thinking to approach the saddle, which the old man had disengaged and removed to a distance. The movement brought such excruciating agony that he was forced to desist from his effort.

"Will you pull that saddle over here?" he requested.

Ashton gave it a toss with his foot that threw it within arm's length.

An exclamation of amazement came from Dwight. The girths had been almost severed with a sharp knife. A glance was sufficient to show this. How it had been done, though, was the puzzle? And who had done it? He knew the girths were all right that morning, for he had looked carefully to them before tightening them.

Dwight knew he had enemies at the Crescent

Ranch, and it was reasonable to suppose that some of these had been guilty of the outrage, probably hoping to accomplish his death by it.

"That's a shame!" he cried, pointing to the work of the knife. "I lost the mustang because of that, and came near losing my life. Only a coward would do that!"

"Keep cool, my young friend!" and Ashton's voice was intoned oddly. "You'll work yourself into a fever in about ten seconds, if you don't. 'When the icebergs lash the sea! Tra-la-la!' By the way—how are you going to get out of this?"

It was a question Dwight had already thought of. It was plain he could not walk. And his flushed face really showed signs of the fever the old man mentioned.

"I'm blessed if I know!" sinking back disconsolately. "If you'll catch that pony and help me to his back, maybe I can ride to the ranch."

The sentence ended in a cry of pain, drawn from him by his hurt ankle.

"Pof!" The old man had turned his face skyward, and expelled his breath in a puff of disbelief.

"You think you're a Mazeppa, but you can't ride no more than a prairie dog. 'A sailor's life is the life for me! Tra-la-la!' I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll put you on my back and carry you!"

"You won't do anything of the kind!" Dwight protested.

"Won't I? That shows you don't know anything about it. Here! Get up here! You can play that I'm a rocking horse, and spur me like sixty!"

In spite of Dwight's expostulations, Ashton lifted him easily in his arms, placed him astride of his back, and began to trot briskly up the slight slope.

The old man's strength was something wonderful. He was not of herculean build and did not seem very muscular, yet he bore Dwight as if he were a mere feather's weight.

"I've left my gun over there," stopping and looking in the direction indicated. "But, it can wait; and so can the pony. If any one runs away with the gun, I hope it'll shoot him—that's all! And if any one straddles that pony, I hope it'll pitch him off and break his neck. 'Oh a sailor's life is the life for me! Tra-la-la!'"

It was a singular predicament to be in—mounted on the shoulders of a man whom he believed to be partially, if not wholly, insane. Dwight knew not whether to be pleased or vexed. Ashton's actions were kindly; yet there was no knowing what queer freak might at any moment come over him. Dwight felt sure that should the fancy possess the old man he would not hesitate to toss his burden heedlessly to the ground.

Besides, where was he bearing him to? Dwight knew that Ashton had an abode somewhere there in the hills. This much he had learned from the conversation of the other mustangers. But, was it near or far?

After trotting lightly along for some time, the old man dropped into a walk. But his strides were long, enabling him to cover the ground at a rapid rate.

"Where are we going?" Dwight ventured to ask.

"To a bird's nest up here in the hills. And there's a bird in it—a fairy—a regular queen of the flowers. 'She's a darling, she's a daisy!' I say—you'll like her!"

"Like who?"

"The fairy! The flower-queen! The canary bird I have just been telling you about."

"But, you haven't any one up here with you?" doubtfully.

"You don't think I'd live up here by myself? She'll meet me at the gate, when the clock strikes eight! My Mary! My Mary! The Maid of Dundee!"

The old man was getting his songs slightly mixed, as Dwight could not fail to notice. But he sung them as cheerily and as lightly as if they were correct in every particular and he had no heavy burden on his back.

Dwight was so busy with his own thoughts that he almost ceased to notice and listen to the vagaries of the old man as he continued onward. He had no idea there was any truth in the statements. The pain of the ankle distressed him greatly, and assisted in distracting his attention. He could not help going wherever Ashton wished to take him; and so he resigned himself in a measure to what seemed fate.

Within less than a half-hour, however, they arrived at a little nook in the hills, girded about and shaded by a growth of aspen; and within this nook there nestled a house so small that it resembled the bird's nest of which Ashton had spoken.

The door of the house was open, and as they drew near it Ashton began to warble his songs more loudly than ever. The verses and the meter were sadly mixed, as were also the tunes, but from all of them there breathed a spirit of kindness and thankfulness.

Through the doorway Ashton stepped lightly, and turning about deposited the young man carefully in a chair.

Then Park Dwight saw that the old man's fanciful declarations were not wholly without foundation.

There was a snowy bed in one corner of the room, and on it reposed the form of a girl. Her large, luminous eyes and pale face betokened sickness and suffering.

She looked inquiringly at Dwight, as the old man advanced toward her.

"You are better, my dear?" Ashton anxiously questioned. "This is a young friend who hurt himself by trying to ride a saddle without having a horse under it. He tells me his name is Parker Dwight, and he belongs to the ranch over yonder."

He then introduced the girl to the young man, calling her his daughter, Ruth Ashton.

The girl stated that she had been ill only a few days. Dwight, nursing his injured ankle, hastened to detail his adventures, and within a short time they felt as if they had known each other for days instead of only for a few brief moments.

As he talked on, Dwight's wonder constantly increased. He could not be unmindful of the indescribable charms of this young woman. She was apparently well educated, too. And old Ashton, by his conversation and quotations, showed that he was not an ignorant man. Why were they here?

A thousand similar queries came to annoy and perplex him. By the people of the ranch, Ashton was considered a harmless, crack-brained old fellow. But did they know of the presence of his daughter here? Dwight had never heard her spoken of.

He could not ask her to explain the mysteries that surrounded her; and as she did not volunteer any word of elucidation, he was forced to grope hopelessly in the dark.

Ashton left the house shortly, but returned soon, bringing his rifle with him.

"I tossed your saddle down by the door," he said. "Your pony has taken unto himself the wings of a bird and flown away."

"I suspect he has returned toward the ranch."

"Very likely. But you won't be able to follow him for a day or two. In the mean time, I'll try to make you comfortable. A home in the hills is the home for me! Like the bird on the wing I would be free! My dear sir, just step this way. Ah! I forgot! I agreed to act as your rocking-horse!"

He airily threw open a door which had hitherto escaped Dwight's attention. It led into another apartment, which, being almost wholly underground, was not visible from the outside.

In spite of the pain in his ankle, Dwight was having a very pleasant time, and had no desire to be moved from the room. But the old man gave him no opportunity to protest. Lifting him in his strong arms, he bore him into the underground chamber.

There was a cot in this room; and when the injured ankle had been bathed and bandaged, Ashton insisted that Dwight should get between the bed coverings and try to obtain some rest.

"Will you carry word to the ranch of how I am situated?" Dwight asked.

"They'll not worry their lives out about you. My advice would be for you to stay away from there altogether. You've more enemies over there than you think."

With this somewhat enigmatical declaration, Ashton retired, closing the door after him.

Dwight heard him in conversation with the girl for some time, but could not understand what was said. Then the talk ended, and for many hours all was silent.

Contrary to his disbelief in his ability to do so, Dwight slept much that day; and the next morning felt, as he expressed it, almost as sound as a dollar. The swelling had nearly departed from the ankle, and he could bear his weight upon it and even walk.

On being admitted into the upper room, he saw that Ruth Ashton was much worse. Her breathing was heavy and labored and she was given to spells of faintness.

Dwight was much touched by her condition of helplessness and isolation, and at the first opportune moment he spoke earnestly to Ashton concerning her.

Ashton was not unaware of his daughter's danger; and the result of Dwight's talk was

that steps were taken to have her removed to Crescent Ranch, where her chances of recovery would be considerably improved.

CHAPTER III. A WILY SHOSHONE.

MAT MARMADUKE quietly got up from his cot in the bunk-house, gave a backward glance at his sleeping companion, and hastened out into the gloom. A suspicious sound had attracted his attention.

Marmaduke had been one of the mustangers engaged in urging the wild horses between the extended, funnel-like wings of the trap-corral when the breaking away of the mustang brought about the chase detailed in the first chapter. He was one of the most reliable men on the Crescent Ranch, although he had not been there long.

More than a week had elapsed since Ruth Ashton had been brought to the ranch; and the medical assistance she had there received had so hastened her recovery that she was now almost, if not quite well.

The days had not been laggard ones to Park Dwight. He had been able to spend much of the time in Ruth Ashton's company, and he had accepted the chance to assiduously cultivate her acquaintance. He felt he was making progress in her good-will and esteem, and was correspondingly elated.

That he was in love with the girl was not a secret to the ranch people, however he might flatter himself that his feelings respecting her were unknown. And none had been better able to read his inmost heart than had Mat Marmaduke.

Marmaduke was his boon companion; and it was the sleeping form of Park Dwight that the mustanger looked back upon as he quitted the bunk room.

"That's somewhat queer," Marmaduke muttered, as he crouched in the tall grass and glanced up at the ranch-house.

Something resembling a light ladder had been erected against the side of the house, and its scraping over the boards was what had caught his ear. The darkness was too great about the base of the building to permit him to see who was at the foot of the ladder.

He did not fail to observe that the ladder's upper end rested just below the sill of the window of the girl's room.

"That puzzles me," he confessed, striving to penetrate with his keen glance the pitchy expanse before him. "If there's a thief there, why should he want to mount to that window? I'm satisfied the girl hasn't any jewelry. Old Crazy-Head is too poor to furnish her with sparklers for her fingers."

He started slightly as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Park Dwight had been aroused by Marmaduke's movements on leaving the room; and after watching him depart, with half-closed eyes, had hastily dressed and followed.

"What's the matter?" Dwight whispered, when Marmaduke held up a warning finger. "What are you poking around out here for?"

Marmaduke pointed to the scarcely visible ladder—and a tremor of excitement and alarm swept over the youth as he saw to what window it was directed.

"What does it mean?"

"I should think it might mean an abduction, if there was any earthly cause for such a belief."

Such a supposition, even though the indications seemed to uphold it, appeared almost foolish. So far as known, the people of Crescent Ranch had only kindly feelings for Ruth Ashton. And an elopement, or an abduction for love, was not to be thought of. No one there, with the exception of Dwight, had evinced any special regard for her.

"It can't be Blessington's work?" Dwight questioned.

John Blessington, the ranch-owner, had evidently not been pleased with the presence of the girl and her father. This displeasure he had shown in a number of ways.

"Blessington, bosh! Why should he? He isn't a fool, whatever else we may think of him!"

The suspicion was dismissed by Dwight as soon as uttered. Nothing could be plainer than that it was wholly groundless. Blessington might not want the girl there, but he would surely not take that plan to rid himself of her presence.

There was a motion at the foot of the ladder, and Marmaduke gathered into a coil the lariat he had brought with him.

"You stay here, quiet as a mouse, and I'll see if I can't gather the fellow in. He'll make a pretty mark as he climbs up that!"

Marmaduke slipped away through the grass;

while Dwight remained statue-like, with his eyes fixed on the gloom at the foot of the ladder.

He could scarcely restrain a little cry of surprise when the head of the climber came into view. It was the head of an Indian.

"It's the Shoshone!" he gasped. "It can't be any other!"

The Indian referred to was a well-known character in the vicinity. He was a worthless scamp, much addicted to the white man's villainous firewater, and given to acts of petty thieving and small meannesses. Yet, notwithstanding his general disreputableness, he boasted the high-sounding name of War Eagle.

Dwight had barely time to ask himself the meaning of this strange apparition, when he heard the swish of the rope and saw it shoot through the air.

Marmaduke was not as successful in his cast, however, as Dwight had been in lassoing the mustang. Probably the superior intelligence of the Shoshone was the cause of the failure.

As the rope hissed through space, the quick ear of the Indian caught the sound—and with lightning-like celerity he threw himself to the under side of the ladder, allowing the noose to crash harmlessly against the rungs.

Before Marmaduke could withdraw the rope or get out a weapon, the Shoshone dropped lightly to the ground and sped away, becoming quickly lost to sight.

It was useless to try to follow him, for his moccasined feet gave out scarcely a sound.

"That was too bad!" Dwight declared, hastening to his friend's side. "I thought you had him. But he was as slippery as an eel."

The ladder was one belonging to the ranch, and they discussed for some time the advisability of leaving it in place as proof of the Shoshone's attempt. But, what would it prove?

There seemed one thing certain, however. Whatever had guided the Indian in this singular effort, the motive had not come from within him but from without. He had been influenced directly or indirectly by another person. And there could be no doubt that his endeavor had been directed against the girl.

They drew down the ladder and bore it to its usual place.

"We will say nothing about this!" said Marmaduke. "We may be able to make some discovery worth the while, if we keep still. Now, if some one had tried to abduct you?"

"We could make a better guess at the reason?"

"Exactly. We should know the reason. But this girl! It staggers me! You haven't grown careless and shown your hand in any way?"

Dwight held up one hand, well knowing however, that the reference was not literal.

"The tan is on yet, anyhow!"

"Yes, I presume so!" dryly. "Be careful that you keep it on!"

The words were mysterious in their allusions, but they revealed one thing: *These two understood each other thoroughly.*

"You must be extra careful, Dwight! The old ranchman is a shrewd fox, and if he once drops to our little game he'll be sure to give us trouble. Two or three times I have suspected him of watching us."

He drew Dwight in the direction of the bunk-house, and continued to talk to him as they walked on.

"I can't make head nor tail out this little effort of War Eagle's. Maybe the scamp was so drunk he didn't know what he was driving at, himself."

"He didn't run like a man whose legs are affected with tanglefoot!"

"True; he did not! But about this other matter! I must impress on you again and again the necessity of absolute secrecy. I'm doing all I can for you—though, so far, that's been precious little. I'm making some headway, however. Don't let your regard for this girl make you neglectful. I'm willing to admit she's a handsome creature, and all that; but we're playing for big stakes—and the work along that line must be paramount!"

Again Dwight promised compliance; and thus conversing they passed into the bunk-room.

CHAPTER IV.

A BRUTAL SPEECH.

RUTH ASHTON, as soon as she arrived at a perfect knowledge of her surroundings, was no more pleased with her position at Crescent Ranch than was John Blessington. Had she been in full possession of her senses at the time of the removal, she would have protested against the change. Yet she could not but confess that it had been beneficial. A more speedy recovery one could not have asked.

She knew nothing of War Eagle's endeavor

to mount to the window of her room, and so slept peacefully and dreamlessly throughout that night.

She awoke, however, with a growing desire to leave the place at the first favorable moment. She was not ignorant—could not be ignorant—of the fact that John Blessington, to use a homely phrase, greatly preferred her room to her company. The ranch-owner had taken no great pains to conceal this.

She had been awake but a short time when her father came into the room, carrying his battered and feathered hat in his right hand.

With great complacency he threw himself into a chair and looked admiringly over the room.

"Better than the little shack up in the hills, this is!" he declared, twirling his hat round and round until the spinning feathers resembled a red wheel. "'I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls!' We used to live in marble halls, my little one, didn't we? But I forgot! That was too long ago for you to remember anything about it."

There was a jocularity in his tones that appeared to cause her pain.

"I want to go away from here, father. Indeed I do. The little shack up in the hills is good enough for me."

"Oh, a home in the hills is the home for me!" tossing the hat on high and catching it again. "I say: why do you want to go away from here? This is the nicest hotel I have struck in a good while. Plenty to eat! Plenty to drink! That's happiness, isn't it?"

The door was slightly ajar; and John Blessington, passing through the corridor, caught the words.

He pushed his way into the room without announcing his coming.

"Perhaps it's nice enough for you; but as for me—I'm getting tired of it!"

He folded his arms as he spoke, and with cool assurance surveyed the pair.

Blessington was a man far past middle life, stout and compact in frame, and of a florid complexion. There was in his appearance a suggestion of the beefy, over-fed Briton, though this did not crop out in his speech. Perhaps long years in the West had altered his accent, even as it had given a roughness to his face and dress.

The girl flushed painfully under his brutal words, while Ashton seemed too astonished to speak.

"I suppose you understand me?" with a cold stare at the latter. "If you don't, I reckon I can make my words a bit plainer!"

"We understand you perfectly, Mr. Blessington!" and Ruth's voice trembled, as she took upon herself the task of replying. "We shall go away from here to-day. We were speaking of leaving just before you came in."

A hot glow crimsoned her pale cheeks.

"I'm glad to hear you say so!" with a sneer. "If the pleasant promise didn't come from those sweet lips I couldn't believe it!"

The old man drew himself erect, passed a hand across his eyes in a dazed way, and shouted with sudden energy:

"Charge, Chester! Charge!"

He lifted a hand as if to strike Blessington, but wavered and drew back under the ranchman's fierce glances.

"Sit down there, and keep still!" pushing him rudely back into the chair. "Charge! What good would it do if I did charge? You could pay anything!"

It was a poor, weak thrust to deliver to such a man as Ashton.

"Will you go away, please?" Ruth pleaded. "Father is not just at himself, now. You have startled and frightened him."

Ashton reclined shivering in a chair, muttering incoherently and fumbling the feathers on his hat.

"You're a scoundrel, John Blessington!" he declared, straightening himself with sudden energy. "You're a scoundrel, sir; and I'm a gentleman. You know it! You know it! And nobody knows it better!"

He subsided, after this outburst; but his stinging words were not without effect upon the ranchman. He cowered as if a storm of shot had been hurled at him; and with a semblance of an apology hurried from the room.

"We will leave here just as soon as I can get ready," Ruth asserted, trembling with suppressed excitement as she addressed her father. "Leave me a few moments, please; and then we will go!"

"We will go!" rising and placing the hat on his head. "Woman proposes and man accepts! Quite correct, my dear! We will go!"

Thoughts of Park Dwight came to the girl as

she hastened the preparations for her departure. She did not like to leave the ranch without seeing him. His presence through many hours of illness had brought her much pleasure. She thought of Marmaduke, too. No one on the ranch had been more kind and considerate. And now she was going away without being able to tell these friends how grateful she was for their many acts of goodness to her and her father.

"Poor papa!" and she glanced at the door through which he had departed. "If he only had his rights!"

She sighed heavily and tears came to her eyes.

But these evidences of weakness disappeared when she heard his returning footsteps.

"Ready?" he asked, looking in at her. "The nest is waiting for the bird, the flower is waiting for the bee. 'A home in the hills is the home for me! Tra-la-la!' If you're ready, let's be going."

"Quite ready!" issuing from the room to accompany him.

And thus together they departed from Crescent Ranch.

CHAPTER V.

SOMETHING OF A MIX-UP.

PARK DWIGHT was shocked, to say the least of it, when he learned that Ruth Ashton and her father had returned to their home in the hills. He knew not what to make of it, having no knowledge of Blessington's brutal action. And without an invitation he could not call on her at her home and ask an explanation. He had not expected her to go away without speaking a word to him; and he was disconsolate.

"I must say that you are as blind as a mole," Marmaduke affirmed, when Dwight came to him with this tale of woe. "The reason they went away is because Blessington ordered them away."

Marmaduke had been watching the ranchman closely; and had, besides, a keener insight into the motives of men.

"Why should be do that?" Dwight hotly inquired.

"Don't ask me hard questions. A man has a right to do as he pleases with his own house. I would answer you straighter, if I knew more. You will have to accept that, for the present."

The statement was not at all satisfactory, but it was all Dwight could get out of the mustanger at that time.

"I must confess that I am completely mixed up," was Marmaduke's thought, as the young man moved away. "Here I've been working at this case for more than a month, and I can't make head nor tail of it yet."

It must have been apparent to the careful reader that Mat Marmaduke was not the mere ordinary mustanger he seemed. Enough has already been said to clearly reveal that. But no explanation of his mission has been given.

Heretofore he had bent his inquiries and his vigilant watching solely toward John Blessington. Within the last few days, however, he had been directing them, in a large measure, toward Parker Dwight.

He had come to Crescent Ranch at Dwight's request—urged to do so by Dwight's money. He had no intention of proving recreant to his employer; but a mystery was developing that he could not solve.

The story which Dwight had told to him in a distant city was a strange one. There Marmaduke was not a mustanger, but a detective. He had seen much of the West, was familiar with its ways and customs, and for that reason Dwight had selected him.

Dwight's visit to him bore direct reference to Crescent Ranch and its rightful ownership. He had already paid it a visit, more than a year before. Not as the dark-faced youth known as Parker Dwight; but as a ruddy son of England. He claimed that his real name was Arthur Blessington; and that his father John Blessington, was the proprietor of the mustang ranch at the foot of Crescent Butte.

It seemed an incredible story, taking all the facts into consideration; but when Marmaduke had heard him through and examined the proofs he had to offer, he gave the story full credence, and agreed to do what he could to assist the young man.

John Blessington was an Englishman who had left his native soil many years before, leaving at the same time his young wife and child. The cause of the separation need not be entered into now. Blessington came to America, and in course of time, and after many wanderings, established the Crescent Ranch.

Years passed on. The child in England grew to young manhood, and the mother died. Then young Arthur Blessington, for that was the child's name, set out to seek his father in the New World.

He came to Crescent Ranch, made himself known to the man whom he believed to be his father, and was rejected of him. But he remained at the ranch long enough to satisfy himself that the man now claiming the ownership was not the real John Blessington, but a pretender.

He went away sorrowful, yet burning with indignation, and determined to assert and regain his rights and punish the man who had usurped his father's name and position and possessed himself of his father's estate.

This is the substance of the account he had given to Marmaduke.

The proofs he had to offer were a few faded letters addressed by his father to his mother shortly after the former left England, together with an old daguerreotype of the real John Blessington.

This picture bore a faint resemblance to the man whom Arthur claimed to be a pretender. It represented a younger man, of course, and a man of more refined and cultured address. But these changes could be easily accounted for, as could also the lack of a British accent. Arthur had not this accent. Few Englishmen of the better and more educated classes have it.

Mat Marmaduke and Arthur Blessington—or Parker Dwight, as he proposed to call himself for a time, came to Crescent Ranch a month or more before the opening of this story, and were successful in obtaining positions. Young Blessington had made almost as complete a transformation in his appearance as he had in name. Under Marmaduke's instructions he had given to his skin a walnut tan, and had dyed his light hair a jet-black. Certain other changes, and entirely different clothing, produced a complete metamorphosis.

So great was the alteration that the ranchman never suspected that the young man who entered his employment as Parker Dwight, was the same who, a year before, had come there claiming to be his son, Arthur Blessington.

A doubt as to the truth of Dwight's story had recently crept into the detective's mind. For weeks, now, he had been watching the ranchman with all possible care and circumspectness. From the first he had believed that if the ranchman was the pretender Dwight claimed, it would not be a difficult matter to come upon some evidences of this fact. Nothing is harder to do than to lead a deceptive career with sufficient skill to hide it from trained eyes and minds.

So far, his surveillance had resulted in nothing. This was strange, if indeed this man was not the real John Blessington.

Marmaduke had talked guardedly with many of the mustangers on matters touching this subject. He had not come out openly and revealed his purpose. That would have been to defeat it. But by indirect questioning he had learned what he could of the ranchman's history. It was not much. Few of the mustangers had been there long enough to aid him in these researches.

Some eccentric actions on the part of the boy had aroused his distrust. Was Park Dwight, himself, the person he professed to be? Or, was he the pretender, instead of the ranchman?

If there was one thing Mat Marmaduke would not lend himself to, it was to assist in bolstering a fraud.

And as he looked after Park Dwight, as the latter walked to another part of the grounds, he wondered if he was not doing that very thing.

"I don't think I ever had circumstances tangle me up quite so badly!" was his suspicious and growling comment. "When I came here, I fancied I should have fair sailing and an open sea. But I'm running into the worst kind of a fog-bank. Which is the fraud? Park Dwight or John Blessington? Blessington has been in control here for years, so far as I can learn; and Dwight is a nobody, coming from nowhere!"

The more he thought the deeper grew the muddle. That Dwight had been able to fee him counted for nothing. The young man was playing for big stakes, and had somewhere raised the money to back the game.

"There is no use in trying to solve it!" rising and stretching himself wearily.

His brain ached from the strain he had been putting on it. And as thought along that line seemed for the present wholly useless, he gladly turned to the routine of ranch work for diversion and relief.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNPLEASANT DISCOVERY.

THE unrest and uncertainty into which Mat Marmaduke was being led were not dissipated by the occurrences of the following morning. As stated, he was watching Dwight quite as closely as he was the ranchman; and the fact that he roomed and slept with Dwight enabled him to do this in a most satisfactory manner.

It was his custom to rise early, and as he got out of bed on the morning in question, he noticed that a suggestive rustle was produced beneath the tick by his movements.

Standing by the bed, he gave the tick an inquisitive 'poke. The singular and suggestive sound came again.

Dwight was asleep—lying with his face to the wall, and breathing easily and quietly.

It was clear to Marmaduke that some papers had been stowed beneath the tick. The circumstance was an uncommon one, though it might have little or no meaning. The two cared for their own room and bed, and Marmaduke knew that no papers were there on the previous evening.

He hesitated, questioning if it would be right to make an investigation without first arousing Dwight.

His uncertainty was ended by the awaking of the young man; who, turning over, looked Marmaduke sleepily in the face.

"Time to get up?" he asked, with a yawn.

"It's my time; you can lie as long as you wish. But there's something beneath this tick, that I'm going to look into. It sounds like papers. How could papers get in there?"

He was watching Dwight closely, and he observed a shade of fear and annoyance settle upon the young man's features.

"It's just an old newspaper I tucked in there," with an attempt at carelessness.

The assumed air did not escape Marmaduke's attention. He saw that Dwight was endeavoring to conceal something from him.

"I'm going to take a look at it, anyhow!"

"Don't, please! I didn't mean to say anything about it, for I doubted if you would approve of it. There is no newspaper there, but some papers belonging to the ranchman. I got them from his room yesterday evening, thinking they might throw light on the matter we're investigating."

He had leaped up, and stood, in his night-dress, at Marmaduke's side. His voice was unsteady.

"I suppose you will not care if I look at them, now?"

"No!" hesitatingly, as he proceeded to don his clothing. "I didn't intend for you to see them; but now that you know of them, you may look them over as much as you please. I haven't examined them myself, yet."

Without further words, Marmaduke lifted the tick. He was about to draw out the papers, when a sudden outcry from beyond the building drew his attention and caused him to desist.

Dwight flew to the door; and Marmaduke, dressing as quickly as he could, followed a little later.

They saw John Blessington clutching the Shoshone angrily by the neck and shaking him, while the Indian sent up howl after howl of displeasure.

It was no uncommon thing for the ranchman to abuse and cuff the Shoshone; and they were about to turn back, when one of Blessington's questions riveted their attention.

"You sneaking thief! What have you done with that money?"

An uneasy feeling came over Marmaduke. If the Shoshone should be adjudged not guilty, after investigation, and a search made of the bunk-rooms, the finding of the secreted papers would tell heavily against them.

Should he go back and remove them?

He decided the question in the negative; and, accompanied by Dwight, went out to where a number of the mustangers were gathering about the ranchman and his victim.

"I don't know what I'm to do with this scamp!" Blessington exclaimed, appealingly, looking from his men to the cringing Shoshone. "He steals everything he can get his hands on; and the only way to make him stay away from here will be to shoot him. I've tried everything else. A lot of my papers are gone, this morning, and a bag of money!"

Park Dwight looked guilty, and an uncomfortable sensation came to Mat Marmaduke. They knew only too well where the papers were. But what of the money?

Some of the mustangers proposed flogging as a remedy.

Blessington, however, cut the matter short by marching the Shoshone into an empty building and there locking him.

"If there's one thing the rascal can't stand, it's hunger!" the ranchman averred. "I'll give that a trial, and see if it won't bring him around. When he knows he's to be kept in there without a thing to eat or drink until he confesses, I think he'll not be long in finding his tongue."

"Jes' shet the liquor off on him fer a half-day, an' he'll blab all he knows!" was the declaration of one of the mustangers, and it was expressive of the general feeling.

The incident having thus ended, the crowd dispersed, and Marmaduke and Dwight returned to their room.

"Now, I'm going to take a look at these papers!" said Marmaduke, fastening the door securely. "We can examine them at our leisure, and the result will determine if you were justified in getting them the way you did. I don't think it's usually advisable to commit wrong that good may come of it. But we'll see!"

Dwight's face was flushed, but whether because of the tone of reprimand used by Marmaduke or for some other reason, would have been difficult to determine.

Marmaduke again lifted the bed-clothing, pushed the tick aside, and slowly drew out the papers.

He started and gave a cry of astonishment when he had removed them. Beneath them was a buckskin pouch evidently containing money. To all appearances the very pouch of which Blessington had spoken, and which he had accused the Shoshone of stealing.

The Mustanger Detective turned about and looked in amazement at Dwight.

The latter had also seen the pouch, and was staring at it with dilated eyes.

Marmaduke had been surprised at the discovery. Now he was puzzled. Had Dwight no previous knowledge of the presence of the pouch beneath the tick, or was his astonishment only an excellent simulation?

The young man strode wildly forward, and catching up the pouch in an excited manner, shook it. There came forth the jingle of coin.

"So help me! I never knew that was there! Indeed, I did not! I took the papers, but I never took that!"

Marmaduke sternly faced him, and taking the bag of coin from his trembling hand replaced it in the little hole it had occupied beneath the tick.

"Tell me truly, Park Dwight, did you put that there? Tell me, as you will answer for it hereafter! I must know the truth, right here and now. I will not disclose it, or say a word to get you into trouble; but you must tell me the truth!"

There was a pitilessness in his voice that was crushing.

Park Dwight quailed under the fire of the detective's eye, and for a moment it seemed he would sink to the floor.

"I shall do nothing to get you into trouble!" Marmaduke repeated. "But if you took that money, I must know it, that I may know what kind of a man I am dealing with."

"I did not! As God is my judge, I did not!"

"Very well, then! I shall accept your word as true. Now, sit down here, that we may see what lies before us. If these papers and this money are found here it will be hard to make any one believe we're not guilty of taking them. That is the first proposition. The Shoshone is wrongfully held for their theft. He must be cleared of that and released. How are these things to be accomplished?"

Dwight had sunk nervously into the chair pointed out to him. His brain was in such a whirl, though, that he could offer no suggestion.

"I don't know!" he humbly confessed. "I wish I did! What a fool I was for ever touching those papers!"

Marmaduke was hastily looking over them, shuffling them between his fingers and glancing at the inscriptions.

"They are worthless for our purpose!" he declared, laying them in a heap on the bed. "If they were only back where you got them!"

He took up the bag of money and looked at it, but did not open it. He was trying to outline a plan whereby he might extricate himself and Dwight, and at the same time free the Shoshone.

"I can't do anything now, for my mind is all in a muddle!"

He took up the papers and the money; and after prying loose a board in the floor, thrust them beneath it.

"We'll have to let them rest there for awhile and risk it!" pressing the board into place. "I don't know what else to do."

Then he got up and left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

PUZZLING CIRCUMSTANCES.

THE sun was lifting itself above the eastern hills, as he stepped from the room and bared his head to the cool morning breeze. He was encompassed by a most unpleasant dilemma.

Outwardly he had accepted Park Dwight's denial as final. But his doubts concerning the guilt or innocence of the youth had not been wholly removed.

The work of the day had already commenced before Dwight made his appearance. Marmaduke noticed the uneasiness of the latter's manner, though it did not seem to attract the attention of the others.

The false tan applied as a disguise on coming to the ranch hid any pallor, if such existed.

The two were busying themselves near the corral, when Dwight tapped the detective nervously on the arm and pointed toward the ranch buildings.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

"See what?" looking in the direction indicated.

"Blessington has gone into our room! Do you suppose he is making a search for the papers and the money?"

"I hope not. He has had nothing to direct his attention there."

The assurance did not quiet Dwight's fears; and he scarcely breathed easier when Blessington came out, shortly after, and proceeded to his own rooms.

This action of Blessington's, even though it may not have had the remotest connection with the stolen articles, served to increase Marmaduke's uncertainty as to the proper course to follow. It struck him that it would be the open and manly thing to go straight to the ranchman and reveal the character of the discoveries of the morning.

To do that, though, might bring unjust suspicion and punishment upon Park Dwight. Park had taken the papers. If that could have been revealed without revealing any further, Marmaduke might have followed out his inclinations. But if he made known the finding of the papers, he felt he must also make known the finding of the gold. And to do the last would be to convict Dwight in the eyes of every one of the theft of it.

"I don't see why he accused the Shoshone!" Dwight ventured, after a time of thought.

"Why not? He is a notorious thief. You remember how he tried to enter the girl's room!"

Dwight remembered it, and had been already thinking about it. The knowledge, however, did not clear his mind of its doubts. For some reason he had half come to the conclusion that Blessington knew more of the Shoshone's action on that night than he would have been willing to confess. He could not believe that robbery alone was the Indian's motive; and, whatever the object, he was inclined to connect Blessington with it.

He did not speak of this to Marmaduke, in reply; and the subject was dropped by both.

Near the noon hour, Blessington and a number of the mustangers rode away to look after some horses on another portion of the ranch.

"This is your opportunity," said Marmaduke, stepping into the bunk-room with Dwight. "If Blessington didn't unearth those things when he came in here, maybe we can get out of the scrape all right, yet."

The money and papers were found beneath the board, undisturbed. If John Blessington had made a search of the room, he had not discovered their place of concealment. That he had made such a search, there seemed no good reason to believe.

"I can't conceive how that money got with those papers beneath the tick!" was Dwight's asseveration, as he made another examination of the bed.

"You may be sure it didn't come there of itself."

Dwight could not help showing signs of confusion, for he felt that the thrust was aimed directly at him.

"I hope you believe I'm innocent, Mr. Marmaduke! I have enemies on this ranch, as you know. I don't think I have done anything to reveal my identity, yet several attempts have been made to injure me. The cutting of my saddle-girths was one. This is another. I don't see how any one could get in here and hide the money where you found it. And how did any one know I had taken the papers and concealed them there?"

"It could not have been known, unless you were watched."

"And in that case, can we do anything to

hide the thing? If some one saw me, why, the matter is already known!"

Marmaduke was endeavoring to arrive at some conclusion concerning the real facts, and in hope of that was closely observing Dwight's words. But he was obliged to confess himself at fault. Either Dwight was innocent, or he was a most consummate actor. Yet the circumstantial evidence of the case pointed to Dwight's guilt.

"There's only one thing for us to do," holding up the papers and the money. "These things must be restored to their places in Blessington's room. That work I shall have to lay on you. When Blessington finds them there, he will know the Shoshone did not take them. And with them away from here, we shall be in no further danger."

"But will that not throw suspicion on some one else?"

"It may not: but that's something we'll have to risk. He may come to the conclusion that he overlooked the articles and that they were not taken at all. If some one should get into trouble because of it, the only thing we can then do will be to make a clean breast of what we know of the affair."

"And give up the fight against this false John Blessington? That is what it would amount to, if I should confess openly to the taking of the papers!"

"We would be compelled to do that, rather than see an innocent man suffer."

A firm compression of the lips showed that Dwight was not ready to agree to that.

However, as the plan proposed by Marmaduke appeared to be the only feasible one, he took the papers and the bag of coin.

"Dispose of these in the room as you see fit," Marmaduke directed. "There is no one to see you go to the house, except possibly the Indian. You will have to pass the shanty in which he is held."

The Shoshone was still a prisoner, and since early morning had been closely confined without anything to eat or drink.

Dwight accomplished his mission as speedily and satisfactorily as possible, and beat a hasty retreat. Whether or not the Shoshone saw him, he did not know.

Blessington and his mustangers returned within an hour or so. The ranchman went at once into the house where the Shoshone was held, and remained with him for some time. As no one else was admitted, it was impossible to say what took place at this interview.

Marmaduke did not attend very strictly to his work that afternoon. He was too closely engaged in watching Blessington and Park Dwight, and any others who came into conversation with them.

Two or three times Blessington visited the Shoshone, and near nightfall he brought him from the building.

The ranchman seemed to be angered, and held a big stock-whip in his hand.

"You say you didn't steal those things, eh?" he demanded, in tones sufficiently loud for Marmaduke to hear him. "You're a lying scoundrel, and I know it!"

Marmaduke's blood tingled, as the lash came down on the shoulders of the Indian. He almost felt that it was a crime to stand by and witness the blow, without saying a word, when he knew the Shoshone to be innocent. Only one reflection comforted him: One flogging would not be half enough punishment for the many petty acts of meanness which War Eagle had committed.

A half-dozen times the lash descended. Then Blessington released the shivering Shoshone and told him to go.

"And don't let me ever see you here again!" the ranchman thundered, threateningly. "If I do, I'll skin you from head to heels. Do you hear that? Now clear out of here!"

And like a whipped cur, the Shoshone hastened from the scene of his humiliation.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MYSTERIOUS OCCURRENCE.

MAT MARMADUKE could not fail to notice that after the events of this day Park Dwight was inclined to stand aloof from him. He was not inclined to wonder at this, for his treatment of the young man and his expressed misgivings would naturally lead to that.

There was one thing that surprised and perplexed the Mustanger Detective and Park Dwight alike. Not a hint came of the discovery by the ranchman of the articles returned to his room. It was passing strange. What was the meaning of it?

Dwight assured Marmaduke that he had so

placed the papers and the money that Blessington could not fail to find them.

There was another thing which puzzled Marmaduke, though Dwight seemed to accept it as a matter of course and to be pleased with it. Blessington began to show the young man many little kindnesses, and gradually to advance him to higher grades of work.

Dwight was really industrious and deserving, and this may have been the cause, though Marmaduke could not bring himself to think so.

One of the most important tasks devolving on any of the men of Crescent Ranch was the driving to the nearest market of the horses which had been broken, or partially broken.

A large number—in fact, the greater portion—of the mustangs last caught were now ready to be driven to the distant railway for shipment to some of Blessington's agents in the East.

To Marmaduke's intense astonishment, it was announced that twenty of these—the first lot—were to be placed in charge of Park Dwight and an old mustanger known as Broncho Bob.

When he learned of this, the detective went to Dwight and held with him a long conversation. He found the young man much pleased with the trust reposed in him.

"You see, it goes to show that Blessington does not yet suspect me!" lying back easily on the cot in the bunk-room and looking Marmaduke in the face. "If he did, he would never treat me that way."

Marmaduke was not yet satisfied with the results of his investigations into the characters of Dwight and Blessington.

"I hope it will pan out all right," he said, somewhat uneasily.

"Have no fear of that!" and with this airy assurance, Dwight dismissed the subject.

The young man and Broncho Bob departed with the mustangs early on the following morning.

The next day one of the men of a neighboring ranch rode hurriedly and excitedly around Crescent Butte and up to the buildings.

He was surrounded by an eager and anxious crowd before his pony had ceased its labored breathing.

Blessington and Marmaduke were of the number.

"There's been devil's work up yander!" he declared, stretching himself up in the deep saddle, and pointing to the hills, while his eyes flashed. "Broncho Bob is dead—shot from behind by a Winchester—an' the young feller an' the mustangs air gone—vamoosed!"

As soon as they could question him, they learned that Dwight and Broncho Bob had passed the other ranch on the evening of the preceding day: and in the morning the mustanger had been found dead in the hills, with a bullet-hole in the back of his head, and his companion and the mustangs missing.

"It was a devil's work!" the mustanger hotly repeated, looking over the sympathetic faces clustered about him.

"Ay! Ay!" came the response, accompanied by a chorus of threatening growls. "Who done it? That's what we want to know!"

Broncho Bob had been a favorite at Crescent Ranch, as well as with all the mustangers throughout the country. He had been widely known, and numbered firm friends by the score. His death, in so cowardly and dastardly a manner, called for prompt punishment of the murderer.

"Who else but the white-livered puppy what was with him?" the mustanger howled, in supreme confidence that he was right in his judgment. "Who else could 'a' done it? Who else would 'a' done it?"

Marmaduke saw how dangerous this accusation must be to Park Dwight. The evidence overwhelmingly supported the mustanger's theory; and there were plenty of men at Crescent Ranch who would be willing to constitute themselves Broncho Bob's avengers—and these men would not inquire too closely into all of the attending circumstances of the case.

The body of Broncho Bob had been brought, by those who discovered it, to the ranch from which the rider came.

"We thought you'd want to plant him in decent style," the mustanger asserted, "an' not bury him out there in the hills fer the coyotes to git at."

No one seemed to question the idea that Park Dwight had slain Broncho Bob, and made off with the mustangs for the purpose of personally realizing on their sale. There were many points to which he could drive them, with favorable chances of disposing of them and decamping with the money before his crime was known.

But for the accidental finding of the body of

Broncho Bob, he might even have gone on to the regular railway station and there effected a sale without creating undue suspicion.

A meeting of the men of Crescent Ranch was quickly organized, in which steps were taken to give Broncho Bob a funeral worthy of his rank and calling, and also to bring his murderer to justice.

When it adjourned, Mat Marmaduke approached Blessington and requested a few minutes' interview.

Blessington frowned, but as the request was so reasonable a one, he could not refuse it.

"I am troubled with some opinions of my own on this subject," the detective affirmed, when he was closeted with the ranchman. "I should have aired them in the meeting, but that would have been useless. The men are convinced that Dwight killed Broncho Bob, and words would not be sufficient to change them."

He felt he was treading on dangerous ground, and speaking in a manner not pleasing to his listener. Nevertheless, he resolved to announce his belief boldly.

"Park Dwight had no hand in the murder of that man. Whatever else he may be, a crime like that is beyond him. But it's useless to say so to the mustangers; not only useless but perilous, in their present excited state.

"I don't pretend to know how the thing occurred, nor what has become of Dwight."

The frown on the ranchman's face had been growing more forbidding.

"One would think you knew all about it, to hear you talk! If Park Dwight didn't kill Broncho Bob, who did?"

"With your permission, that's what I propose to find out. I want you to release me from my work here a few days."

For a moment Blessington seemed inclined to refuse the request.

"I don't think that a search will amount to anything," looking earnestly at Marmaduke. "Park Dwight is either in hiding not many miles from where the deed was committed, or he is on his way with the mustangs to some market. In either event, he can hardly fail to be captured."

"And if captured?"

"Hung!"

"You will give me the time?" Marmaduke urged.

"I presume I shall have to, though I know you can do nothing to prove your friend's innocence. Perhaps I ought to blame you for wanting to try. But there's one thing, Mr. Marmaduke: If the mustangers learn what you are doing to thwart them, there may be trouble!"

There was an undercurrent of deep meaning in these words.

"I'll risk it!" Marmaduke declared, understanding full well the hidden threat.

The mustangers would not be pleased to have one of their number question the correctness of their judgment, and take active measures to set aside their purpose; and Blessington, if he so chose, could make this sentiment a source of deadly peril to the detective.

Yet, realizing this, Mat Marmaduke left the house, fully resolved on his line of conduct.

CHAPTER IX.

DWIGHT'S ADVENTURES.

THE Mustanger Detective was right in his general conclusions concerning Park Dwight. The young man had been guilty of neither murder nor theft.

On the night which witnessed the slaying of Broncho Bob, the two had gone into camp without a thought of danger. They had made a hard drive that day, and the mustangs were now hopped so that they could not stray from the little valley in which they were held.

Near morning Dwight was aroused by a rifle-shot; and, springing up, found himself covered by rifles in the hands of two masked men, and Broncho Bob lying dead at his feet.

The camp-fire had burned out, and only the faint light of a waning moon served to reveal the terrible sight.

Not a word was spoken by either of the men; and Dwight was too horror-stricken to utter a sound.

While one of the men continued to threaten him with a rifle, the other came forward and deftly secured his hands with a bit of cord.

Then they beckoned him to move on in advance.

"What is the meaning of this?" he indignantly demanded, finally regaining his tongue.

The only answer was a prod from one of the weapons.

For a time fear kept him still. Then he broke out again:

"I want to know where you are taking me, and what you intend to do with me?"

"If you don't shut up, I'll blow the top o' yer head off!" was the consoling reply. "Better be sayin' yer prayers 'stead o' argyfing! We're a-goin' to treat you well, if you'll let us."

He fancied there was something familiar in the disguised and husky tones of the speaker.

With a desire to draw further words from him, he continued:

"What did Broncho Bob or I ever do to cause you to use us in this way?"

"The smartest men air them what holds their tongues! If you talk too much, yer li'ble to find yourself in the same condition as Broncho Bob, if that's what ye called the feller."

This assumption of ignorance, Dwight believed, was meant to deceive him.

He hoped the other masked man would say something; but no sentence of his could draw a word from that individual.

For more than an hour he was marched through the hills; and after many twists and turns intended to bewilder him, he was brought before the door of a dug-out. Day was not yet at hand, and he could see little of the nature of the dug-out's surroundings. It was located in a hollow, and was well screened by bushes. This much, and only this much, he could determine.

The dug-out was opened; and when the bonds had been removed from his wrists, he was thrust into it, and the door closed and barred behind him.

There was one narrow aperture just above the door, and through this he could see the men as they moved away. A familiar something in the walk of one of them—the one who had so pertinaciously remained silent—brought to him a startling suggestion. Heretofore he had not been able to observe the peculiar stride of this man, owing to the fact that he had been forced to move in advance.

"It can't be!" with starting eyes, as he peered after the receding figures. "Surely, it can't be! And yet, I would know that walk anywhere! It must be the ranchman himself!—and the other is Pinto Bill!"

The discovery—if it was a discovery—was so overwhelming in its suddenness and unexpectedness, that for a time his mind reeled, and he could only gasp his suspicions in a horrified and parrot-like way.

Previous to this, he had had no thought that John Blessington could be in any way connected with the killing of Broncho Bob. And even now, he could not fully believe that he had seen and guessed aright.

Why should Blessington commit or abet in so foul a crime? What could the ranchman expect to gain by it? He had apparently reposed full trust and confidence in the mustanger. Certainly Broncho Bob had done nothing, so far as Dwight knew, to merit such a fate at the hands of the ranchman.

When he came to question concerning his own fate, something of the true reasons actuating Blessington dawned on him; and, as they did so, he could not repress a shudder.

Taking it for granted that he was right in thinking the two men, John Blessington and Pinto Bill, the cause for his incarceration in the dug-out was not far to seek. He had been wholly mistaken in his belief that Blessington had not penetrated the disguise of tan with which he had thought to hide his identity. Perhaps Blessington had known him from the first. At any rate, it seemed plain he knew him now.

If this surmise was correct, then the ranchman would have every reason for wishing to get rid of him, by fair means or by foul. If Park Dwight could establish the fact that the ranchman was a pretender who was falsely and criminally holding another's property, there was no one on earth whom the ranchman would have greater cause to fear.

But why, if all this was so, did not Blessington and Pinto Bill slay the young man when they slew the mustanger?

"They mean to make it appear that I killed Broncho!" Dwight whispered, horrified, cowering on the floor of the dug-out, and pressing his hands against his eyes as if to shut out the fearful suggestion. "They will make it seem that I killed him; and then they will come here and hang me for the murder!"

He argued that it would be an easy matter for Blessington's tools to scatter the mustangs, or run them to some other part of the hills. After which they could claim to have found him in concealment in the dug-out—and the rest would not be a difficult matter.

He got up from his position on the floor, having heard a shuffling sound without.

On looking again through the aperture, he saw the Shoshone, War Eagle, take a turn about the place and then seat himself indolently on a rock a few yards away.

That the Shoshone had been sent there by Blessington to act as a guard over the dug-out, seemed most likely. And if so sent, then War Eagle and the ranchman understood each other much better than had heretofore been apparent.

The Shoshone scarcely moved from his lazy posture until the breaking of day. He then arose in a shambling manner, opened the door of the dug-out, and looked in.

"Time for eat?" he asked, with a repulsive grin.

He held the door with one hand, only swinging it partially ajar, so that it was useless for Dwight to attempt to escape.

Dwight did not answer the grinning inquiry, whereupon the Shoshone drew a dirty bundle of food from the pocket of his hunting-shirt and tossed it upon the floor of the dug-out. After a time he made a journey to a spring a short distance away and returned with a canteen of water, which he flung in in the same fashion.

It would have required a keen appetite to force one to partake of the food furnished by War Eagle; and Dwight had no appetite. He drank of the water, and then stationed himself at the aperture to see what he could of the outer world.

He had no arms. Properly armed, he might have been able to dispose of the Indian, if sufficiently desperate, and in some way manage to break out. As it was he could do nothing.

The Shoshone, having exhausted his acts of hospitality, stretched himself lazily beneath one of the trees, as if to dispose himself for sleep. In this attitude he remained hour after hour.

The confinement and the fears that beset him rendered rest a thing impossible to Dwight. While the Indian snored on in seeming oblivion, Dwight paced up and down the confined area of the underground room, revolving and re-rotating the events of the night and morning until the pressure upon brain and nerves was something frightful. Unless relief of some kind came, he felt he would go mad.

The day passed without any incident worthy of note; and when night came, the Shoshone aroused himself. Coming into the dug-out, he drew the door to after him and fastened it.

Dwight knew not what to expect, and nerved himself for a struggle. Mentally he measured his strength with that of the Indian. The latter overtopped him in height and was almost twice as strong. Yet, notwithstanding this disparity, Dwight had thoughts of flying at him and making a gallant fight for freedom.

The Shoshone nipped the idea in the bud by presenting a pistol at his head and motioning him to sit down on the floor.

It is useless to refuse. Such an argument is all powerful. Then, holding the menacing pistol in one hand, he deftly proceeded to tie Dwight after the most approved fashion. And having accomplished this, he left the cabin, fastening the door after him.

No doubt the Shoshone thought Dwight would essay to break away that night, if ever.

Forced to remain for hour after hour in a recumbent attitude, Dwight eventually fell asleep.

He was awakened by the low creaking of the door on its wooden hinges. Some one was stealthily descending the narrow flight of stairs. He could not restrain a cry of fear. Was the Shoshone returning to murder him, as Broncho Bob had been murdered?

He was reassured by low-spoken words.

"My name is Norval! On the Grampian hills, my father feeds his flock!"

It was an exclamation characteristic of no one save the queer old man, Al Ashton.

Dwight's cry of fear was followed by one of pleasure.

"Oh, Mr. Ashton, is it you?" starting up in spite of his bonds.

"It's no one else! I knew you were burrowing in here like a mole gopher, and I've come to help you out. My dear sir, to be a prisoner is to be miserable. That's why I never keep any pets. A canary in a cage, or a deer with a rope about its neck, always makes my heart ache."

Dwight could tell that he had drawn himself up in the center of the room as if commencing one of his interminable and wandering harangues.

"Will you release me, please? I am tied up here, and can hardly move!"

"Your pardon, my dear sir! Your pardon! When my heart is on the sea, my mind is some-

where else. I am sure you will overlook it. Why, yes; that is what I came here for!"

He stepped to Dwight's side, stooped over him, fumbled for a moment at the cords, and then severed them with a knife.

Dwight had been in a fever of fear concerning the presence of the Shoshone.

"Where is War Eagle?" he whispered. "You haven't killed him?"

"I never shed the blood of any thing higher up in the scale than an animal. The Shoshone may be higher and he may be lower. Let's see! How do I make that out?"

"You have tied him, then?" anxious to cut off any long-winded speech.

"Yes sir; that's what I've done! You can beat King Solomon at solving riddles. I tied him. He wasn't willing that I should do so, and I gave him a gentle tap on the head to quiet his scruples."

He turned toward the door; and Dwight, without any invitation, followed close at his heels.

They found the Shoshone snugly bound and rolled in a heap beneath the tree under which he had been resting when the old man came on him. It was too dark for them to see the fierce glare that gleamed from the Indian's eyes.

"Oh, we will be free, we will be free! Like the birds of the air, we will be free!" the old man mumbled, as he turned from the Shoshone and led the way up the hillside. "I'll have to come back after awhile and cut that fellow loose. It hurts me to leave him that way."

"His friends will find him, I've no doubt. And now, if you'll tell me, how did you know I was in that dug-out?"

"Oh, me! I know everything. I know what makes the winds come, and the clouds. I can tell you when it's going to frost, and when there will be an eclipse. I knew you were there, because I saw the Shoshone sneaking this way. I followed him. Whenever you see that Indian crawling through the bushes, you may know there is game afoot."

Having obtained this much information, Dwight was anxious to question the old man concerning Ruth. But he only said:

"Do you intend to take me home with you?"

"Ay! that I do! In our home in the hills, we shall be free! So, come along!"

CHAPTER X.

A BOLD CHARGE.

IT was daylight when Ashton's shack was reached. Ruth was standing at the door, looking out through the increasing light, marks of anxiety on her countenance. These vanished, however, when she saw her father returning.

"I didn't know you were gone," she said, addressing him, after she had welcomed Dwight. "And I was becoming alarmed."

"He always tells me, when he intends to leave," turning to Dwight in an explanatory way. "But he didn't do so last night; and so, when I awoke and found him absent, I didn't know what to think of it."

"Important business, my dear!" Ashton declared, stooping to kiss her. "Important business! This man was surrounded by raging wolves, and I had to go to his rescue."

She seemed to understand that this was hyperbole; and though she looked questioningly at Dwight, she made no direct inquiry.

At the first favorable opportunity, however, Dwight revealed to her something of the truth that lay back of Ashton's statement.

Naturally, she was horrified beyond measure; and not only that, she was filled with fear for the young man's safety, even in her father's house. Should he be followed there by his enemies, Ashton could do nothing to preserve him from danger.

Dwight was fully aware of this. Nevertheless, he was supremely happy and contented there in the society of the woman he loved. Scarcely a night since first meeting her had she been out of his dreams; and her seemingly rude departure from the ranch-house had at times greatly distressed him.

There was ample opportunity now for an explanation of this, as well as for a full discussion of many other matters. Yet not once did Dwight touch upon the subject nearest his heart—his love for her.

Having fasted throughout the previous day, he was in a condition to do ample justice to the excellent breakfast the girl placed before him. As he ate, the query came to him again and again: By what means did Ashton obtain a livelihood, and what was he doing here?

Constantly in his mind, too, was the haunting fear that Blessington or some of his men might come there.

The fear was well-grounded. The Shoshone knew who had released Dwight, and had seen the direction he and Ashton had taken. What more likely than that Blessington or some of his mustangers would soon pay a visit to the dugout? They would find the Shoshone; and under his guidance would come directly to the Ashton home.

The old man constituted himself a sort of guardian of the house and its surroundings; and all through the morning, he strolled about, humming garbled snatches of song and verse, and watching with eager eyes the adjacent hills and valleys.

"There is some one coming!" he announced, hurrying into the house early in the forenoon. "A lone horseman rides through the hills. Why rideth he? Maybe you can tell me, if you'll descend to take a look!"

He had doffed his feathered hat; and now bowed, as he waved it toward the hills.

It required no pressing invitation to induce both the young man and the girl to leap to their feet and rush to the door.

Following the direction indicated by Ashton, they saw a horseman debouch from the hills into the valley that contained the shack. They recognized him, even at that distance, as Mat Marmaduke.

Marmaduke had left the ranch soon after his conversation with Blessington. What strange intuition led him in the direction of the home of the Ashtons he could scarcely have told. Perhaps it was because of his knowledge of the young man's regard for the girl, though that could not wholly account for it. However led or guided, he bent his course toward the Ashtons, seeking for information on the subject of his quest.

Dwight broke away from the others and ran forward to meet him, feeling that whatever he might have to fear from the other men of the ranch, he could certainly trust Marmaduke.

As he drew near, Marmaduke reined in his horse with an exclamation of glad surprise.

"My dear boy! How are you?" extending his hand, which Dwight gripped firmly. "This is, indeed, unexpected!"

Dwight walked at his side as he continued on toward the house, and in hasty sentences related all that had occurred.

Marmaduke was not so greatly surprised as Dwight had thought he would be.

When they reached the shack they found the girl there alone.

"Father has gone to release the Shoshone," she explained. "He has been feeling sorry for him ever since he left him there."

They looked across the billowy slope, and saw Ashton far away, racing on with the ease and speed of an Indian runner. The endurance possessed by this old man was akin to the marvelous.

The girl agreed to station herself on a little eminence and keep a sharp lookout for the coming of any of the men of Crescent Ranch, while Dwight and Marmaduke retired within the house to discuss what they should now do.

Even though Dwight was so certain the murderers of Broncho Bob were Blessington and Pinto Bill, his unsupported word would not be sufficient to establish the fact, especially as he had seen the face of neither.

They had not fully reached a conclusion when Ruth Ashton announced the return of her father.

The old man was coming back at a much greater speed than he had gone; and when he reached the house, he was covered with perspiration, and fairly exhausted.

"See that!" he exclaimed, bounding into the room and shaking a piece of paper before the eyes of the astonished men. "Read that! It goes ahead of anything that has been written since writing was first invented!"

The half-crazed look, so habitual, had vanished from his face under the influence of the excitement that controlled him.

Marmaduke grasped the letter and hastily read it, while Dwight looked over his shoulder.

It was truly a surprising epistle.

"PINTO:—Come to the ranch at once, and take charge of the men in the search for Park Dwight. You're the only man who can do it; for, except myself, you are the only one who knows where to find him. Come at once! I send this by the hand of the Indian.

B."

Their eyes opened in amazement as they grasped the full meaning of these hastily-scribbled words:

"Where did you find this?" Marmaduke asked.

"I didn't find it. I took it from the Shoshone. Before I untied him, I searched him; and that is what came into my drag-net."

Direct as the explanation was, it was confusing. Obviously the note had never reached Pinto Bill. For some reason, then unknown, the Shoshone had failed to deliver it.

"We couldn't want stronger proof of who the guilty men are, could we?" was Dwight's triumphant inquiry.

"I saw something else besides that and the Indian!" Ashton interrupted.

"What?"

"A lot of Crescent Ranch mustangers were coming through the pass just south of the dugout when I let the Shoshone go. They are there by this time."

"And they will be here as soon as they can get here?"

"I think they will!"

This was too plain a proposition to admit of debate.

"If you will back me in it, Marmaduke, I will take that letter, and with it face John Blessington in his own house, and accuse him of his crimes!"

Dwight's declaration was as startling as it was daring and original. Yet, was it not the most advisable thing to do? He could not hope now to escape from the hills. Sooner or later he must be found by the searchers; and the blind vengeance that would descend on him might also descend on Marmaduke.

There was not much time in which to discuss the matter. Whatever they did they must do at once.

"I will go with you!" the detective affirmed, after a moment's thought.

They disliked to leave the Ashtons there, not knowing but they might be maltreated by the searchers, but they could do nothing else. They could not defend them if they staid, nor did it seem advisable for the Ashtons to accompany them.

Therefore, after giving the latter such advice as they thought might be beneficial, they set out, traveling as rapidly as possible.

Fortunately they found John Blessington alone at the ranch. One body of men—the searchers—had been sent off under the leadership of Pinto Bill; and the remainder of the mustangers had gone to convey home the body of Broncho Bob.

Blessington was pacing nervously up and down in his room: and his amazement must have been great when they entered and confronted him.

His form trembled and his cheeks blanched, when Park Dwight drew out the letter and held it so he could see it.

"I presume you recognize the handwriting?" Dwight asked, sneeringly. "You ought to, for you wrote it. It's a mighty interesting letter! Shall I read it to you?"

"I don't know what you mean!" Blessington asserted, assuming an air of bravado. "Neither do I understand why you are here. What have you done with my mustangs? I should think that after killing Broncho Bob you would not be in a hurry to come back!"

"I came back here because I knew that you, John Blessington, are the really guilty party. There is no need for detail. You or Pinto Bill shot Bronch Bob; and you two forced me to go with you to a dug-out in the hills, and held me there in charge of Shoshone. But there's no need to iterate these things. This letter proves your guilt!"

John Blessington could not control the tremor that had seized him; and now, as these clear-cut sentences came like stabbing knife-blades, he re-treated, gaspingly.

"It's a lie!" he hollowly declared. "I don't know what you're talking about. When the men come back, I'll have you hung for this insult."

If ever guilt was betrayed in a man's face and manner, it was in this case.

Marmaduke stood stolidly by, though the lines of his features were stern and rigid.

Dwight did not look to him for assistance in this battle of words, but courageously and unflinchingly continued:

"So long as I hold this letter you will not dare to do anything of the kind. Your men are out now hunting for me, with the intention of hanging me without a trial. Many of them are honest—some of them are your tools. Now, I come here demanding your protection. You can give it to me. You must give it to me!"

Blessington broke into a tirade of abuse and denial.

Dwight was unyielding in his demand.

"They are already angered, and if I say the word, they will string you up without ques-

tion!" was Blessington's threatening declaration.

"Mr. Blessington, you will not say the word!" coolly and calmly. "If you try anything of that kind—if you refuse to do what I ask—I will reveal the contents of this letter to the crowd. Then, if I am hung, you will stretch hemp from the same limb!"

Blessington endeavored to rally his failing courage; but was unable to do so, and broke down completely.

"This is a piece of blackmail," he whined. "I never wrote that note. But I see it will get me into trouble. If I do as you say, will you give it to me that I may destroy it?"

"Not at all. That would be to place the weapons all in your hands. I shall hold this bit of paper. Then I know you'll do what I ask."

Blessington would not confess his guilt. Bluster and threats were, however, useless on his part; and, when he saw he could do nothing else, he consented to use his influence to shield Dwight from the fury of the mustangers.

CHAPTER XI.

ON A SLUMBERING VOLCANO.

LED by the Shoshone, the mustangers under Pinto Bill went direct from the dug-out to the residence of the Ashtons. They expected to find Park Dwight in hiding there.

Those who were in the secret with Pinto had been at much pains to mislead their companions; and this they did by a circulated report that War Eagle had found Park Dwight concealed in a dug-out.

Before starting for the home of the Ashtons, Pinto took the Indian aside and had a short talk with him.

"The Shoshone says that the boy found out he was bein' watched, and give him the slip!" was Pinto's explanation of the substance of the conversation.

Inasmuch as it was not revealed that Ashton had had anything to do with Dwight's escape, the father and daughter were not molested.

Ashton would give no information; and consequently a search was instituted, which resulted in finding the trail of Dwight and Marmaduke, made by them on their return toward the ranch.

Pinto was much puzzled by this. He had not anticipated finding a double trail; and he could not surmise what would induce Park to take that route.

Nevertheless, he concealed his puzzled uncertainty, and said, with a pleased grin:

"I knowed that we'd run ag'in sumthin' up this way, fer the Injin was shore the boy come straight to this p'int."

Dwight had scarcely succeeded in forcing Blessington into a consent, when the men under Pinto Bill reached the ranch buildings.

"No flunking now!" was Dwight's stern warning. "You can smooth the matter over out there, and pacify those fellows; and you must do it. If you don't, I'll have Mr. Marmaduke read this letter aloud before them, and exhibit to them the hand-writing!"

It was a difficult role Blessington was forced to undertake; yet he could not shirk it. The first thing he did on approaching the men, was to hold a long private conversation with Pinto Bill. The note which Dwight held equally implicated Pinto; and that individual would be as anxious as Blessington that its contents should not be made known.

Pinto was badly frightened by his chief's revelations, and asserted his willingness to drop the matter then and there. But it could not be done without patching up some kind of an excuse to offer to the men not in the secret. Dwight and Marmaduke had been trailed to the ranch buildings; and the mustangers were now restlessly awaiting the results of the conference between Pinto and Blessington, before moving on the house that shielded the supposed murderer.

Before these men Blessington stepped, endeavoring to conceal all traces of agitation in his voice and carriage.

"The young man you are looking for is now in the house, together with his friend, Marmaduke," he said. "They came to me awhile ago, and were able to present such evidences of the innocence of the young man that I could not doubt their correctness."

He began in this vein; and spoke for fully ten minutes, arguing, persuading, and lying, heaping up falsehood after falsehood in his endeavor to carry his point.

At first the men listened surprisedly. Some of them believed, and those who had knowledge of the guilt of the ranchman and Pinto Bill gave ready adhesion to Blessington's statements.

Others, however, showed their discontent by sullen mutterings.

Blessington had spoken, though; and on Crescent Ranch his word was law. And within less than a half-hour after the return of Pinto's party, Dwight and Marmaduke came from the house and mingled with the crowd which had so recently sought the life of the former.

They could not fail to note, however, the glances of vailed hate that were bestowed on Dwight. Marmaduke came in for a share of these. The distrust of the men was deep and natural.

"My boy, we are walking on a slumbering volcano!" was Marmaduke's comment, when they had an opportunity to speak to each other unheard by others. "I look for an explosion at any minute. Keep your eyes open and be prepared for the worst."

Fortunately for them, though unfortunately for the Ashtons, an event occurred that gave a change to the current of thought at the ranch. The Ashton residence was destroyed that night by fire.

It left the old man and Ruth homeless; and, notwithstanding their mutual detestation of Blessington, they were forced to seek his protection.

The fire was plainly an incendiary one, and many comments were made concerning its probable origin. To Marmaduke and Dwight, and to the Ashtons, the truth readily presented. War Eagle, the Shoshone, had applied the destroying torch; and this he had done because of the treatment he had received at Ashton's hands.

It was deemed unwise to publicly make this assertion. The part Ashton had taken in Dwight's release was not commonly known, and one explanation must necessarily be followed by another.

Dwight tried to conceal from himself the fact that he was pleased by what had happened. It brought Ruth Ashton where he could see her and converse with her every day. He endeavored to fancy that he was distressed by the destruction of the girl's home—and he was in a measure—but his distress was not as deep as he felt it ought to be.

CHAPTER XII.

A FIT OF JEALOUSY.

RUTH ASHTON had been at the ranch but a few days when Park Dwight was seized with a fit of bitter jealousy. Ruth Ashton had dared to look with favoring eyes on a certain young mustanger, known as Jim Crosby. What made the sting more poignant was the fact that Crosby was a handsome and fairly well-educated young man, courteous and graceful in his bearing. Such a young man as is likely to attract the heart of a fancy-free maiden.

In many things Ruth Ashton was a shrewd young woman. Her regard for Park Dwight was more than an ordinary friendship. She had had little training in the school of etiquette; yet her native good sense and that nice intuition which accompanies natural refinement, told her that she could do no more foolish thing than to openly reveal to Dwight her true feelings.

Her recovery from her late indisposition had been complete; and she was now the picture of youthful health and beauty. Few men could be unaware of her charms—a thing Dwight was not slow in discovering.

Yet she was not a coquette. Jim Crosby was a gentleman, even if he was only a mustanger. She saw that he admired her, and believed that his admiration would develop into nothing more serious. Admiration was a thing pleasant to her. If she could receive it without harm to herself or another, and at the same time pique Park Dwight into greater devotion, she thought it allowable.

Perhaps she was mistaken. To thus toy with the tender passion was like playing with fire. It has its elements of danger.

As for Park Dwight, he passed through all the varying stages of anguish, despondency, hope and fear—and back again. At one moment he felt like flying at Crosby's throat and demanding of him an explanation of his conduct. To do a thing so foolish would only have served to render him an object of ridicule and reveal to the laughing world the tempest that was chafing his soul.

At times he feared Ruth Ashton cared nothing for him; and then his despondency would become so great that he almost determined to leave Crescent Ranch forever, even if it did involve the abandonment of the work that had brought him there. Then he would receive a smile from the girl who was so tormenting him, and the clouds would roll away and the sun shine as of yore.

It was an unenviable frame of mind. Driven at length almost to desperation, he went to the Mustanger Detective for consolation and advice.

To his discomfiture, when he broached the subject, Marmaduke only laughed at him.

"My dear Dwight! You have yet to learn much concerning the inscrutable ways of women. They are as changeable and uncertain as the wind; and in these mountains, you know that that is the most changeable thing on the face of the planet. It will blow from all directions in the course of an hour. Learn a lesson from the wind, and apply it to the present case. You can seldom tell what a woman thinks, or don't think, by what she does."

"But you asked my advice. Here it is: If you love the girl, pluck up courage and tell her so."

"He either fears his fate too much, or his deserts are small,
Who fears to put it to the touch, and win or lose it all!"

There you have my sentiments, expressed a great deal better than I can express them. If you have the grit, go in and win! And you'll find me betting my last dollar on your success!"

The advice was pointed and encouraging, and Dwight mentally resolved to profit by it.

The Ashtons were housed in a building not far from the bunk-room occupied by the young man and Marmaduke. He decided that that evening he would test the matter by boldly calling on her and speaking to her of the thoughts that had so long troubled him.

But when he came to make the effort, he found himself unequal to it. A number of times he passed and repassed the house, striving to muster sufficient courage to enable him to enter and face his fate. But he could not, and at last crept away to his room and to bed, mentally cursing his stupidity and want of decision.

There were other things, of more serious import, to trouble Mat Marmaduke.

The danger that encompassed him was neither small nor imaginary. By siding with Dwight against Blessington he had brought upon himself the displeasure of the ranchman and Pinto Bill, and all their tools and friends. When he had said to Dwight that they were standing on a slumbering volcano, the words were not idle. He realized it, and meant it.

Since the day the young man had been shielded from the wrath of the mustangers by Blessington's interposition, Marmaduke had been the recipient of many black looks and lowly-muttered threats.

Dwight, in his infatuation for Ruth Ashton, was happily oblivious to many things witnessed by the detective. Dwight's peril was equally as great as Marmaduke's; and in a large measure Marmaduke had to be eyes and ears for both.

The funeral of Broncho Bob had been a trying period. The sight of their slain comrade had wrought many of the mustangers to a frenzied pitch, and great circumspectness was required on Marmaduke's part to avoid an open rupture. It might have come, anyhow, but for Pinto Bill, who knew the danger it would involve and did what he could to continue the patched-up truce.

All that was passed now, and Broncho Bob was only a memory. But the perils surrounding the detective and his friend did not abate.

That Dwight was now his friend scarcely needs the telling. His earliest suspicions against the young man had been banished. The ranchman's unworthiness and pretensions had been proved beyond cavil by his own acts.

With brazen impudence, the Shoshone put in an appearance at the ranch on the succeeding morning. It was a thing Marmaduke had not anticipated, and he was anxious to observe how Blessington would treat the Indian. The ranchman seemed not to be aware of the Shoshone's return.

"That Indian is here for mischief," Marmaduke thought, as he observed him hovering about and eying the house occupied by the Ashtons.

He spoke to Dwight of his fears; and between them they agreed to keep War Eagle under close surveillance.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SHOSHONE AGAIN.

MAT MARMADUKE flattened himself on the grass and pressed an ear against the earth to more perfectly catch the faint sounds that had reached him.

It was near evening, and the time two or three days later than the events last mentioned.

He was in the hills a half-mile or more distant

from the ranch buildings, and not more from Crescent Butte.

Since his talk with Dwight on the subject, he had closely watched the movements of the Shoshone; and because of this watching he was now sprawled on the grass in the hills.

He had seen Ashton advance in that direction, and the Indian follow a short time after the old man's disappearance. A suspicion that foul play was intended came to him irresistibly.

Both the old man and the Shoshone had vanished into a timbered coulee, and from this came the sounds that now riveted his attention.

"There's sure something wrong there!" was his nervous declaration.

With his ear pressed against the earth, he seemed to feel rather than hear the jarring vibrations produced by a struggle.

Leaping to his feet, he ran toward the coulee, and quickly penetrated to the point from whence the sound came.

He found the Indian and the old man engaged in a hand-to-hand combat; and even as he advanced, he saw the Indian strike Ashton to the earth and then leap on him as if to bind him.

Giving a shout to draw the Shoshone's attention, he hurried forward as rapidly as he could. The rascally Indian did not wait for the detective to reach him; but, with many frightened backward glances, darted away, leaving Ashton where he had fallen.

The old man was not much hurt; and, as soon as the Shoshone left him, he struggled to his feet.

"The miller was hung on his mill-gate,
For murdering my sweet sister, Kate!—
And I'll—be—true to my love, if my love will
be true to me!"

The tune was as quaint and old-fashioned as the words, and all seemed so incongruous and out-of-place that Marmaduke scarcely knew what to do or say.

"Are you hurt?" he anxiously asked.

"Hurt? Feel of that arm. I had a fight with the Shoshone just now. Didn't you see how he ran?"

"What did he attack you for?"

"He thought he could lick me. But he didn't!"

He held out his right arm and patted the muscles of it with his left hand.

"He didn't know me! He thought he did; but he didn't!"

In spite of his anxiety Marmaduke could not help smiling. The old man was so serious in his boastings and so confident that he had overthrown the Shoshone and frightened him away!

"Let's walk back toward the ranch buildings," persuasively. "I want to talk with you, Mr. Ashton. I don't think you quite understand the danger that surrounds you here. Now, that attack of the Indian's?"

"Oh that!" contemptuously.

Marmaduke saw he must take another tack. The recollection of the fight with the Shoshone did not tend Ashton toward calm consideration of any subject.

Marmaduke was somewhat puzzled as to the cause of the Shoshone's action. From what he had seen it was plain War Eagle meant to tie Ashton. What else did he mean to do? Surely he must have intended to remove him to some point—though just what his purpose was was not clear.

"I want to talk to you about John Blessington," drawing him up the coulee in the direction from whence they had come. "I am afraid he is no friend of yours."

The mention of John Blessington had a strange and almost unaccountable effect on the old man. His face became suddenly distorted with rage, while his eyes rolled wildly.

"Don't speak of him to me, sir! Don't speak of him to me! He is a grand scoundrel. He is Dives and I am Lazarus; and he begrudges me the crumbs that fall from his table. That man has injured me, sir—injured me beyond measure—and insulted me!"

In spite of the injunction to make no further mention of the ranchman, Marmaduke proceeded to draw Ashton into a more extended discussion.

"For years that man has been my enemy. He has slandered me. He has crushed me. My heart was once as tuneful as the harp of Taral. It is now broken. Likewise, if you will notice, my voice is a little cracked!"

He began to hum at a familiar tune, apparently taking pleasure in the very harshness of the tones.

"Yes, sir," looking Marmaduke in the face, when he had finished, "it is cracked!"

"As mad as a March hare," the detective thought. "It is a mere waste of words to talk with him."

Nevertheless, he continued the conversation, striving to gain some inkling of the true cause of the old man's seemingly deep hatred of the ranchman. But he learned little. Ashton was volatile enough, and sufficiently denunciatory to satisfy any one, but the talk yielded little information.

Only one thing was sure. Ashton felt harshly toward Blessington, and the ranchman disliked and even feared Ashton. How deep this fear was—or hatred, or whatever it might be—was abundantly shown by the Shoshone's attempt. That this had been inspired by Blessington, Marmaduke had not a doubt.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN INGENIOUS PLOT.

"PINTO," and Blessington showed signs of extreme nervousness, "matters haven't been turning out at all as we calculated. It worries me!"

The words did not express half as much as the tone and manner in which they were uttered.

"Worries" was a term entirely too feeble. Harassed almost beyond endurance John Blessington seemed to be.

Pinto Bill was sitting before a table in the ranchman's room. His body was bent forward, with his elbows resting on the table, and he was filling the room with a cloud of smoke from a short, black pipe.

It was his custom to spend much of his evenings there in the companionship of his employer, and this was particularly so since the two had commenced to scheme so elaborately in common.

The failure of the Shoshone in his attack on Ashton was the cause of Blessington's outburst.

"It appears to be impossible to get rid of either the old man or the young one. It's useless to trust the Shoshone. He makes a botch of things every time. He hasn't sense enough, the trouble with him; and then, when he can get whisky, he's about as unreliable as they make 'em!"

Pinto Bill gave another long pull at the black pipe before replying.

"If you'd 'a' took my advice, the young one could 'a' been done-up easy. I allus thought you was a fool then, an' allus shall think so. 'Twouldn't 'a' took on'y one more bullet to have settled him, at the same time Broncho was settled. That's what I've said afore, and I say it again!"

"Don't express your opinions quite so bluntly!" Blessington warned, getting up and approaching the door to see that it was secured and that no one was near to overhear. "That tongue will run your head into a halter, one of these days!"

"When it does, I calc'late there'll be another head alongside of it!" meaningly.

"You know why I opposed that!" seating himself again and staring hard at Pinto through the smoke. "If the two had been found there dead, our danger would have been that much greater. I thought to lay the blame on the young fellow, and have him hung for it. If it had worked, that would have explained the killing and got him safely out of the way."

"But it didn't work!"

"No; it didn't. But it was no fault of mine. I did what I could. If the Shoshone had given you that note, as I told him to, or destroyed it, the thing would have turned out differently. But you can't trust that Shoshone to do anything. I was to blame for giving him the note. That much I am willing to admit!"

"The straight trail is allus the best trail; that I've said, an' I'll stick to it!" with a dogged shake of the head. "An', likewise, I stick to another idee that's pretty much like it! Do your own work, an' you'll know it's done. Them's my sentiments, now and forever!"

He knocked the ashes out of the pipe by slowly tapping it against the heel of his boot, and again looked at Blessington.

"You want to know what I intend to do now?"

"That's what I want to know," Pinto averred. "I can't say that I'm in love with yer plans, but I'm willin' to hear 'em."

"There's one thing certain," leaning across the table and speaking in a low voice. "Park Dwight has got to get out of here, or we have. There's no dodging that! He's got a rope around our necks every minute that he retains possession of that note."

"An' Marmaduke?"

"He's just as bad, and just as dangerous to

us. We can stand the presence of the old man. He's a blabbing old fool, and may get us into trouble some day. But every one knows he's crazy; and so not much attention will be paid to anything he says."

"I'd feel easier, though, if he was away from here. How to get rid of him and the girl is someting I have not yet been able to settle. But that isn't the most important thing, now. The first thing is to get the young man out of the way."

"An' Marmaduke!"

"Yes; and Marmaduke. I am satisfied he is investigating the killing of Broncho Bob, and if not headed off will eventually get at the facts. Now, I have a plan that, if it works, will rid us of both of them."

"I hope it'll be better than some o' yer last ones!" bluntly.

"You know the mustangs have never been found. That we know where they are is not to the point."

Pinto Bill winked, as an acknowledgment of the truth that he knew all about the disposition of the mustangs. In truth, he and another had driven them to a station where they were not known, and had there sold the animals, and brought the proceeds of the sale back to Blessington.

"You see that?" and Blessington flipped a bank-check on the table and pushed it toward his confederate. "If you will notice, that is drawn in favor of Mat Marmaduke. Observe the signature at the tail-end of that, will you? It's the name and in the handwriting of Pope Dresden. You know Pope? He has a ranch not far from the railway."

Pinto Bill knew Pope Dresden well; and he knew him for as big a scoundrel as there was in or near the Wind River Mountains.

"I was lucky enough to be of great service to Pope, a year or two ago. You remember the time—when he was accused of rustling that bunch of horses. I got him out of that scrape; and in return for it he has agreed to come to my assistance."

"So, he signed up that check, payable as you see to Mat Marmaduke. Now, the plan is this, and Pope is to help me in carrying it out: the claim is to be made that Marmaduke came to him with the mustangs, and sold them to him, and received this check in payment. Plain sailing, so far, eh? See if you continue to follow me!"

"Go on! I've got the cotton out of my years!"

"I found this check on the floor of the bunk room in which Marmaduke sleeps."

"You found it?"

"That's the claim I'm to make. I found it there, and being surprised that Marmaduke should receive a check for so large an amount of money from Dresden, when I knew he had never done any work for Dresden, I retained possession of the check and proceeded to do a little investigating."

"The result! I found that Mat Marmaduke had sold the mustangs to Dresden, and this check was in payment for them. And on that, I proceeded to build a theory. Marmaduke and Park Dwight were confederated together for the purpose of killing Broncho Bob and getting the money from the sale of the mustangs. Marmaduke shot Broncho; and Dwight played the other trick and deceived me into thinking him entirely innocent. But now my eyes are opened, I know who the guilty parties are, and I intend to see them punished!"

He looked hard at Pinto Bill as he concluded.

"How does the plan strike you?"

"It's a beautiful one," Pinto admiringly confessed. "I don't think I ever see a beautifuller! But will it work?"

"There is only one 'if,'" and Blessington tapped the table thoughtfully with his fingers.

"It's always the way with your plans!" forbiddingly.

"Hear me through, will you, before condemning it? I say there is one 'if.' And how to overcome it is the only unsettled question. The boy still has that letter; and if he produces it, will it knock this plan?"

The conundrum was too much for Pinto Bill's limited intellect.

"The straight way is allus the best way!" he asseverated.

"What would you do?"

"I'd put the young fellow on the trail o' Broncho Bob; an' Marmaduke, too, if there's a necessity for it."

Blessington recalled the case of the old man who had been so lately assaulted by the Shoshone. For some reason they were anxious to rid themselves of Ashton, and cared little how it

might be accomplished. The burning of the house, and other acts, sufficiently revealed the deep-seated hatred War Eagle held for the old man. This hatred they had counted on, when instructing him to bear the old man away and hold him a prisoner. They knew that if War Eagle did so, the result would be Ashton's death—for sooner or later the Indian would slay him.

Thus Ashton would be out of their way, and the crime could not be laid at their door, inasmuch as they had not instructed the Shoshone to proceed to such extremes. The claim would have been set up that they were only desirous of frightening the old man into leaving the ranch and its vicinity—urged by the fact that he was an unmitigated nuisance; and if any punishment was visited on the Shoshone in consequence, they believed it could not have affected them.

"I think you are wrong in that!" Blessington declared, returning to Pinto's assertion that the straight way is always the best. "The danger is too great. If a man travels a main trail he is sure to be seen; but if he sibics around through the bushes he may escape notice."

"Now, I've selected you, Pinto, to get possession of that unfortunate letter. With that in our hands, we are safe. Just how you are to do it, I'm not able to suggest now. But I'll help you. And get that letter you must!"

For an hour longer they sat at the table, conversing in stealthy tones; and then Pinto Bill crept out into the darkness and to his place in the bunk-house.

CHAPTER XV. LOVE'S DREAM.

ALTHOUGH Park Dwight could not muster sufficient courage to speak to Ruth Ashton on the subject constantly uppermost in his mind, he yet managed to be with her or near her an hour or two each day; and to discuss, as young people in love frequently do, a variety of subjects in which neither had any interest. Any one observant of them would have noticed that there were many long pauses in the conversations, and that the beauty or the tickleness of the weather were subjects made to do hard duty.

One morning she signified a desire to visit the ruins of her late home, that she might poke among the ashes for some treasured relics. Dwight could not lose so favorable an opportunity; and accordingly urged that the visit be made at once, insisting that he had an abundance of spare time on his hands that day.

The hard work of breaking the last bunch of wild horses brought in was principally over; and for a day or two, unless a storm should occur, there was really not much work demanding attention at Crescent Ranch. But this period of comparative inaction must necessarily be of short duration.

He used this as an argument, and with such success that she consented to permit him to act as her escort that morning to and from the ruins of the shack.

Three or four miles, even though the trails are not the best, can be quickly covered on horseback.

In what an inconceivably short time those miles slipped behind them! It seemed they had scarcely commenced the journey until it ended; and it furnished supreme satisfaction to the young man to see how thoroughly his companion appeared to enjoy this little outing.

All that remained of the Ashton home was a great heap of cinders and a pile of charred timber which had fallen criss-cross upon this. A yawning black cavity, partially filled with similar materials showed where the underground apartment had been.

"Down there is where you'll find it," she said, standing near the hole and pointing into it, while she held the bridle-rein of her horse in the other hand.

The reference was to a small iron box, which she stated had held some valuable papers belonging to her father, and a ring of her mother's.

It was not a delightful place into which to descend.

"The box should be in the northeast corner," she explained, as Dwight tied the horses preparatory to commencing the search. "It seems too bad to ask you to go in there. I don't care for anything but the ring; but I should like to have the ring."

Dwight insisted, of course, that nothing could please him better than to be able to serve her in any way; and when he had secured the horses, he returned to the cavity, pushed the charred timbers aside and let himself down.

The ashes were piled in great heaps, and it re-

quired a deal of search and much prodding to locate the box. But when found, it was not a difficult matter to resurrect it and toss it to the bank above.

She had called it an iron box; but it was only of thin sheet iron, and the upward toss broke the hasp from its fastenings and scattered the contents on the ground.

The ring was there, but little injured. As Dwight climbed out, the girl was gathering and arranging papers; and a glance he obtained of one, showed him on it, in bold letters, the name of John Blessington.

He gave a gasp of surprise; but, as she was not looking at him at the time, he succeeded in concealing from her his perturbation.

The papers were somewhat charred, but they still held together, and were quite readable. He would have given much to have known the contents of the one bearing Blessington's name; but he could not question her about it; and she volunteered no information, as she folded them up and replaced them in the box.

"It's surprising they were not destroyed," he declared, hoping to get her to talking about them.

"They would have been, if the fire had got fairly at the box. But they were shielded down there. I don't care much for the papers, but I was anxious about the ring."

She closed the box with the papers in it; and, placing the ring on one of her fingers, turned it round and round admiringly.

They were interrupted by the sharp clatter of horses' feet; and, looking up, saw Jim Crosby and another mustanger ride hastily by.

They had been riding fast and furious, as if in chase of something; and some distance in advance, Dwight and his companion saw the disappearing form of one of the wild dogs which were becoming so alarmingly numerous in and near the Wind River Range.

Dwight arose to his feet with some signs of confusion; but the girl, as Crosby doffed his hat, replied with a smile and a bow.

A fierce twinge of jealousy shot through Dwight's heart.

He was confused, and ill at ease while the mustangers remained in sight. Then, with a sudden passionate impulse, he seized Ruth Ashton's hand; and, holding it firmly, looked her full in the face.

"You do not care for that man?" he questioned, with tremulous accents. "Tell me that you do not!"

She evinced some surprise, and attempted to draw the hand away, though there was no anger in her manner.

"I must know the truth, here and now! You cannot be ignorant of it, Miss Ashton! I know you cannot. You have seen it in my eyes, in my actions, in my words!"

She retreated confusedly, yet laughingly, still trying to withdraw her hand.

"You must hear me," clinging tenaciously to the pink fingers. "You must and shall know that I love you!"

She broke from him, and ran with her hands clasped over her ears; while he followed, resolutely determined to force a reply from her.

He did not come up with her until she had reached the horses. She stood there panting and trembling, with her hands on the saddle, as if desirous of mounting.

"Is it to be me or Jim Crosby?" he asked.

"You silly fellow! I like you both. Won't that do?"

"You can't care for both alike!" he asserted, doggedly.

"Perhaps not. Will you assist me into the saddle?"

Her cheeks were hot and flaming; and he could see that in spite of her pretended carelessness merriment she was deeply agitated.

"Do you care for me more than you do for Jim Crosby?" he insisted.

"Perhaps I do," with charming naivete. "Now, help me to mount."

Park Dwight was shrewd enough and sensible enough to see that he had drawn from her as strong a statement as he could then hope for. He assisted her as requested, without further questioning; and when he had secured the box, they set out together on their return journey.

To Park Dwight that homeward ride was a dream of delight. Ruth Ashton had not told him so in so many words; but he knew that he had succeeded in winning her for his own.

CHAPTER XVI. THE BLOW FALLS.

MARMADUKE and Dwight were aroused that night by an unusual occurrence. They had re-

tired late, and been asleep but a short time. They seldom fastened the door of their bunk-room, even though they had once experienced the folly of not doing so. As they lifted themselves in the bed, they beheld four men enter through the open doorway.

These men were John Blessington and Pinto Bill, and two others. They held weapons in their hands, and with them threatened Dwight and the detective.

Blessington had made some material changes, or rather additions to his plans, as will be quickly seen.

The two men in the bed knew that danger portended, as soon as they beheld those unwelcome visitors.

Marmaduke attempted to spring out of the bed, an example imitated by Dwight.

"Hold on there!" Blessington ordered, fearing that Marmaduke was making for a weapon. "Take it cool! We've come for you, and we mean to take you! Some more of my money is missing, too, and I shouldn't wonder if we find it here. Men who steal mustangs may be expected to steal anything they can put their hands on."

"Red-hot stoves included!" Pinto Bill chimed in.

The two thus menaced, knew not what to do or say, being wholly in the dark as to the nature of the charge—for Blessington's words were somewhat mystifying.

"You will allow us to get up and dress, I reckon?" Marmaduke inquired, striving to maintain his customary coolness and caution. "Then, perhaps you will be a little clearer in your statements! We have stolen no mustangs, nor anything else!"

"You'll not dress till we take a look through your clothes!" the ranchman hotly asserted.

Marmaduke and Dwight climbed out of the bed, as Pinto Bill, in obedience to Blessington's order, proceeded to "go through" the clothing.

"May I be dog-goned!" and Pinto, with simulated surprise, drew from a pocket of Marmaduke's coat the identical bank-check which Blessington had given to him on the previous night.

It had been in his hand when he thrust the hand into the pocket; hence, he had no trouble in producing it.

He held it aloft that all might see it.

"I thought you would find it!" was Blessington's triumphant declaration. "See if it has Pope Dresden's name to it. If it has, it's the very bit of paper we're looking for!"

Both Marmaduke and Dwight were almost too bewildered to speak. Marmaduke stared at the check which Pinto was holding up for inspection, and which he had seen come from one of his own pockets.

"Whatever that is, I never placed it there!" he indignantly asserted. "This is some kind of a trick that you are playing on us. What is the paper, anyway?"

"Delightfully ignorant!" Blessington sneered, holding the lantern so that the check might be more clearly seen. "They don't know anything about it, Pinto! So you can go on with your search. That money is missing, yet."

"This is an outrage!" and Marmaduke's eyes blazed with wrath.

Regardless of these angry words, Pinto Bill coolly continued his search. He was looking for something else, more than he was for money. That was the letter believed to be in Dwight's possession.

He went carefully through the detective's clothing, pocket by pocket, without discovering anything; and then turned to the garments worn by Dwight.

John Blessington, while watching him closely, was doing all he could to distract the attention of the others. Taking the check, he held it so the men who accompanied him could see the contents of it as well as the signature.

These men were honest fellows, not in his secrets, and whose evidence would therefore be the most valuable against Marmaduke and Dwight.

Unfortunately for the safety of Dwight and his friend, the desired letter was really stowed snugly away between the leaves of a note-book in one of his pockets.

He was fearful, as was Marmaduke, that Pinto would discover it; and they kept their eyes on the slippery rascal as he continued the search, and would not be diverted by any efforts of Blessington's.

In all ways that were dark and tricks that were vain, however, Pinto was an expert. He found the note-book, with the slip of paper between its leaves, and extracted it with all the skill of a necromancer. Crushing it in his hand,

he dropped it slyly into the top of one of his boots.

This was done so deftly that Dwight, who had his eyes on him all the time, did not see it. He observed the book in Pinto's hands, however, and turned pale.

Notwithstanding the semi-gloom in which Pinto was working, Marmaduke saw and knew something of the rascal's maneuver; and he shouted, with the intention of calling the attention of the mustangers:

"Here, you! What are you taking out of there?"

"This!" said Pinto, dropping back the notebook and drawing out a flat wad of bills. "The very thing I've been a-lookin' fer, b'ginner! Hyer's yer money, Blessington. It was stuck down right hyer!"

He came forward with the coat and the wad of bills, that Blessington and the mustangers might inspect them.

Marmaduke's fears increased. Blessington and Pinto were proceeding in so high-handed a manner because they felt confident of success. He was sure the tell-tale letter, which they had so long held as a club over Blessington's head, had passed into Pinto's possession. Yet so skillfully had Pinto managed the transfer that it seemed useless to say anything about it. That the whole thing would be denied most bitterly, was certain; and affairs had been so pre-arranged that Marmaduke could not make good the charge, if he preferred it.

"And I whipped the Shoshone for stealing that other money from me, when I'll wager that if we had looked here we should have found it, too!"

Blessington spoke in a manner that was convincing to the honest mustangers. They had never before suspected Marmaduke and Dwight of taking things that did not belong to them; but here was the evidence of it. They could not disbelieve their own eyes. Had they not seen the bank-check come out of Marmaduke's pocket, and the money out of Dwight's?

"Gentlemen, in spite of appearances, I must positively assert our innocence!" and Marmaduke drew himself up sternly and defiantly. "We neither took that money nor that check—as I now perceive it to be. We knew nothing about it. Those things were put there by Pinto Bill at the moment he found them!"

"Ye'r' a liar!" shouted Pinto, facing angrily about. "I didn't take out nuthin' but what I found in there, an' you know it!"

"Why pay any notice to so foolish a charge?" Blessington questioned. "If a man will steal, of course he'll lie to get out of it. The idea is absurd—ridiculous!"

The mustangers held the same opinion. And indeed the flushed face of Marmaduke seemed to bear evidence of guilt.

"Talk won't do you any good;—not that kind of talk!" Blessington sternly asserted. "There ain't anything more to look for, so far as I know;—though you may have been robbing other people. Now you may slip into your clothes as quick as you like."

"You will at least tell us what we are charged with!" said Dwight, as he began to don his garments.

"Stealin'!" Pinto howled, placing his lips near the boy's head. "Stealin'! Yer head must be turnin' to a cotton-ball that you can't get that through it. You didn't think we wus a-chargin' you with runnin' a Sundy school, now, I reckon?"

John Blessington was more accommodating than his satellite.

"I shouldn't think you'd need to ask any questions about it!" with a show of surprise. "The stolen money speaks for itself. And as for that check, it was given to you by Pope Dresden—or rather given to Marmaduke—for the ponies that disappeared when Broncho Bob was killed."

This was said for the benefit of the mustangers more than for the purpose of enlightening the accused men.

"Pinto says you are charged with stealing. I may add that you are also charged with murder."

The deadly character of the plot being thus revealed, Marmaduke saw how really desperate and dangerous a one it was. It proved that John Blessington, knowing he could not hold the ranch against Dwight, and fearful that the murder of Broncho Bob would be brought home to him, had cunningly planned to rid himself of these, his most menacing enemies. And at that moment the chances for the success of his plan seemed remarkably good.

The detective saw it was useless to bandy words with the ranchman and his crew, and

that it was equally vain to hope to convince the mustangers that he and Dwight were not guilty. If they escaped Blessington's vengeance, it must be by some other way.

"I suppose you want to know what we are going to do with you?" Blessington sneeringly queried, when all were ready to leave the bunk-room. "We are going to take you—both of you—to the gorge where Broncho Bob was shot, and there string you up to one of the trees!"

The vindictiveness displayed in the words was something terrible.

He drew the door slightly ajar, and hallooed loudly, to bring assistance.

"Wake up, ye sleepers! Lively! Lively! This way!"

Few of the men of the ranch were sleeping so soundly that the calls failed to arouse them. They tumbled from their bunks in all directions; and, half-dressed, came running to the scene of disturbance.

Pinto Bill and the two mustangers covered the prisoners with their revolvers and held them in the room, until John Blessington could make an explanation of the cause of his outcry.

This he did in his oily, plausible manner; and to all who heard him his words bore conviction. He exhibited the bank-check and the crumpled wad of money, and told how and where these had been found; explaining likewise what had led him to suspect the accused. This was, so he stated, a communication received by him from Pope Dresden, making mention of the sale of mustangs by one of his (Blessington's) men.

Those who were friendly to Blessington's interests received the story as if it were something they had long anticipated would come to light; and immediately they sent up the cry.

"Hang the murderers! String 'em up! String 'em up!"

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ASTONISHING REVELATION.

MAT MARMADUKE distinctly heard these cries, and knew full well what they portended. The men of Crescent Ranch, good and evil alike, would soon be transformed into a senseless, howling, bloodthirsty mob, into whose hands it would be certain death to fall.

Marmaduke had been for some time carefully weighing the chances of escape. To say the least, they were not bright. Pinto Bill and the two mustangers stood between the bed and the door. But when those fiendish cries went up, he hesitated no longer. Better to die striving for liberty than be strung up as malefactors.

There was a chair near him, and with sudden energy, he hurled it at the heads of the three men. They were grouped together, and the whirling chair made sad havoc when it struck. One of the legs of the chair caught Pinto Bill in the stomach and doubled him up like a jack-knife; and he, falling heavily against the mustangers, brought them down in a heap.

"Now, run for it!" Marmaduke whispered, suiting the action to the words.

With a bound he reached the doorway, threw the door wide open, and was out and away in the darkness before Pinto Bill and the mustangers could recover.

Dwight endeavored to imitate his example in this. But he was not so successful. As he darted by Pinto, the latter reached out a detaining hand and clutched him by the foot. Dwight succeeded in breaking Pinto's hold, but the delay came near being fatal.

The confusion in the bunk-room had reached the ears of the men who were gathered about Blessington; and, thinking the prisoners were trying to break away, they rushed in that direction.

They saw Dwight as he leaped to his feet—for the clutch had tripped him:—and, as he sped on, they darted in quick pursuit.

The two mustangers in the bunk-room had also regained their legs and were close on his heels; and even Pinto, though he had been placed almost *hors de combat*, joined his efforts to those of the others.

Marmaduke had disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed him, and no sound returned to reveal the direction he had taken. This was an unfortunate thing for Dwight. It bewildered him and came near resulting in his capture.

Fearing that he would be shot down, his first effort was directed to placing one of the buildings between himself and those in chase.

As it happened, this building was the one occupied as a residence by Blessington. The door of the hallway through which Blessington and Pinto Bill had a short time before descended, was open. The enraged mob was close at his

heels. The open doorway offered a tempting hiding-place. He feared that if he ran on he would be captured; and so darted in there; and with quick but light footsteps hurried up the stairway to the second floor.

To his great delight, he heard the frenzied crowd stream past. The very boldness of his ruse had aided him. Not for a moment did the men think that such a place would be taken as a place of concealment. And so they hurried on into the gloom beyond.

Dwight, believing the house deserted by all save himself, stood at the head of the stairway a little while, wild-eyed and panting, and undecided as to his future course.

He was about to retrace his way to the outside, and make another dash of it, when he was deterred by the sounds of returning footsteps.

Some of the searchers were hastening back, having discovered nothing of him along the route they had taken.

At this, Dwight crept with stealthy steps along the upper corridor, searching for a place to hide. On that side of the building, there were but two rooms; and one of these was Blessington's. It was unlocked, but he feared to enter it.

He stole to the next one, and tried the knob. The door refused to yield.

There was a window at the end of the corridor, through which a faint light came, and he glanced at it inquiringly. It would not do to risk life and limb in an attempt to reach the earth by a leap from that window. So he turned again to the door.

He had some keys in his pocket, one of them being the key to the bunk-room. He took this out and fitted it to the lock. Like many cheaply-built Western houses, all the locks at Crescent Ranch were from the same, or nearly the same, pattern. Hence, one key would serve for about all of them.

To Park Dwight's great joy, the key turned readily, and the door opened. He slipped into the room, locked the door from the inside, and then listened almost breathlessly.

He could hear the mustangers hurrying about below and swearing at their lack of success. It was a pleasure to him to know Marmaduke had escaped. The detective was abundantly able to take care of himself. Would he be equally able?

He wondered what he should do if the search extended to this room? A window opened from it to the outside; but he shuddered as he thought of leaping so great a distance. He almost wished now that he had continued on and trusted to the darkness, as Marmaduke had done. Up there he felt very much like a caged rat.

In spite of the peril surrounding him, his thoughts unavoidably turned to Ruth Ashton and her father. It was not likely they could be unaware of what had occurred.

Crouching and shivering there in the darkness, he watched the slow minutes go by, expecting every one to herald the approach of enemies. But instead of the sounds growing louder about the buildings, they decreased, and finally died away almost wholly.

Yet, he could now and then hear voices just below the window, and knew the time had not arrived for him to try to make his way out.

All at once his nerves were thrilled by the tread of footsteps on the stairway. They entered the corridor—and the cold sweat broke from every pore, as he heard them turn in his direction.

The sounds were only made by one pair of feet; and these halted before they reached his room.

"It must be Blessington," was his mental comment; and a sigh testified to his relief, as he heard the steps advance into the ranchman's room.

He was safe for the present, whatever the future might hold in store. So far, his presence in the building was not suspected.

He was not mistaken in thinking that the man in the adjoining room was the ranchman. Blessington was terribly annoyed and chagrined over the escape of the men on whose destruction he had so strongly counted. He was also intensely angry; and had denounced Pinto Bill and the mustangers a triplet of blockheads.

Their explanation of how Marmaduke and Dwight had broken away, seemed wholly unsatisfactory; and he believed they were inexorable.

The youth's heart thumped heavily as he listened with bated breath to the restless strides of the ranchman. Up and down, up and down the room, John Blessington paced, a prey to the deepest anguish. In forcibly taking possession of these men and making the charges he did, he

had taken a step not easy to retrace. What the outcome might be, if they were not caught and brought back, he feared to question. It might mean his downfall and utter ruin.

Dwight could tell that Blessington was in a state of deep disquiet. Nevertheless, his own fears were too great to let him dwell much on that.

He was wondering if he might not be able to slip past the ranchman's door without detection, when other footsteps sounded on the stairway. These, too, came to Blessington's room, and entered.

Dwight gave a start as he heard the voice of the new-comer.

It was the voice of Albert Ashton, and it held a harsh and firm sternness heretofore unknown to the young man.

Blessington turned rudely on Ashton, and inquired:

"What are you doing up here? Clear out of here! I don't want you about!"

"I shall not leave until I have said my say!" was the defiant reply.

Dwight could not see the look of vindictive rage with which the ranchman turned on the speaker.

"No; I shall not go until I have said what I came to say. I want you to give up the pursuit of these men!"

"What you want is a matter of small moment to me!" sneeringly.

The old man gave him a stern glance.

"Will you go away from here and quit bothering me?"

"Not until you say you will call back your men!"

"You are a crack-brained, crazy old fool, Ashton! And if you don't go out of this room, I'll throw you out!"

"That's what you have said before," Ashton bitterly asserted. "After you have robbed me, you call me crazy!"

"I never robbed you!"

"Whose ranch is this?" Ashton demanded. "It's mine! It's mine! You stole it from me, and now you call me crazy, and an old fool!"

"You're a driveling idiot!" was the ranchman's hot rejoinder.

"You stole the ranch from me—and now I'm an idiot!"

"Get out of here, will you? If you don't, you'll make me do something that I'll regret!"

These bewildering words came plainly to Park Dwight, and their suggestiveness made his head whirl.

"If you don't call back those men, I'll publish to the world that I'm John Blessington, and that the ranch is mine. You know it is! You know it is! And what will the world say when I tell of it? Ha! ha! ha!"

There was something wild and uncanny in the screechy laugh with which the charges were concluded. Dwight felt his blood chill, as he listened to it.

Any one bearing that laugh could not doubt that it was prompted by a mind diseased.

But the words brought a great and overwhelming thought to the front. Was Albert Ashton, or the man so known, the real John Blessington? If so, he was Dwight's father! And Ruth Ashton!—what was she?

These queries crowded suffocatingly on the listening youth.

"The world will say just what I say," Blessington made answer, "that you don't know what you are talking about!"

"Ay! that's it! Always it! I am a crazy old fool who don't know what I'm talking about; and you're the honorable John Blessington, the rightful owner of this ranch! You're a fraud! That's what you are; A fraud!"

"I'm a fool for talking with you," the ranchman sneered. "Any one who would believe your nonsense would be an idiot indeed! You can't hurt me, and I won't call back my men. So, get out of here! I'm going to catch them and hang them; and if you talk too loud, you'll put yourself in a way of being served in like fashion!"

He gave Ashton a rude push that sent him through the doorway, and then closed and bolted the door.

Dwight could hear the old man as he stormed and raged in the corridor outside. The rough maner in which he had been ousted from the apartment appeared to fill him with fury. He vented this in heavy kicks on the door; and when the ranchman paid no heed to these, he departed muttering threats and maledictions.

Dwight felt that he himself must be going crazy. Was this old man his father? He had never dreamed of such a revelation. He had

often fancied how it would seem should he ever find his father, and what the meeting would be like. But the warm affection he had always believed he would give his father was strangely chilled by the complications surrounding this discovery.

If Ashton were his father, then Ruth—being, according to all preconceived notions, the old man's daughter—must be a blood relative.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PAINFUL INTERVIEW.

AFTER Ashton's departure, Dwight could hear Blessington uttering low and angry comments on Ashton's stupidity and general insaneness. The ranchman had recommenced his restless walking to and fro.

For a long time Dwight lay quietly on the floor, where he had stretched himself, bearkening for the return of the searching party and striving to catch the drift of Blessington's words. He was tortured by uncertainty concerning his course of action, and by the thoughts produced by Ashton's revelation.

The long silence without tempted him into again thinking of how he might escape from the building. There was but one practicable way out, and that led by the ranchman's door.

Finally Dwight got up, and using the key carefully, let himself into the corridor.

The tread of Blessington's boots still echoed from within the room. Dwight removed his shoes, and under cover of the sounds made by the ranchman, crept softly toward the head of the stairway.

This he reached without discovery, and was equally successful in his descent.

Crouching in the shadows of the doorway, he scanned the earth in every direction. He could see nothing, but the voices of two or three men in conversation came distinctly to him from a point near the bunk-house.

He walked slowly around the buildings, and stopped when he came opposite the house occupied by the Ashtons. There was a light visible through one of the windows.

It was a late hour for a light to be seen there; and a thrill that was as painful as it was pleasurable came to him at the thought that Ruth Ashton might be keeping vigil on his account.

An uncontrollable desire to see her and speak to her came over him. A few words with her would settle the tormenting question of her possible relationship. He wondered if Ashton were there—he could not yet think of the old man as his father—and whether it would be advisable to visit the house.

The light drew him on as if it were a magnet. His reason told him that now, while he had the opportunity, he ought to put as great a distance as possible between himself and Crescent Ranch. But he could not resist the inclination that so strongly impelled him.

It was plain that the searching parties were still away; though how soon they might return could not be foretold.

He made a wide detour in approaching the house, wherein he fancied Ruth Ashton was devotedly sitting, oppressed by fears for his safety.

He was careful to avoid the fan of light that issued from the window; and as an additional measure of precaution advanced to a side door which was buried in gloom.

He tapped lightly; and this not being responded to, brought his knuckles down with a slight increase of force. He could hear some one advance; then the sounds ceased, as if the one who had come forward had stopped to listen.

He rapped again.

"Who is there?" came the question, in Ruth Ashton's voice.

He advanced close to the door and announced himself.

The door was softly unlocked, and the girl looked out at him. She was evidently surprised to find him there.

He could see the outlines of her form, but not her face.

"Can I come in?" he timidly asked. "I am afraid to talk out here. Is your fath—father—Mr. Ashton—in?"

He received a negative reply to the last, and an invitation to enter. Her manner showed how fearful she was, and that she thoroughly appreciated his danger.

"Come this way!" she urged, leading him to a room away from the light. "Are you not afraid you will be seen?"

He was afraid of that; but just then was more concerned with the questions that had been so deeply agitating him.

"I thought you were far enough from here,"

she whispered, as she piloted him into the room, and then stood lingering near the doorway.

"The men were here twice, looking for you."

He received the information with a start of surprise.

"Where is Mr. Ashton?"

"I don't know. He has been gone for some time, and I am expecting him back every minute. The searchers will return, too, probably; and I am afraid you will be found here!"

Her words were tremulous, and he could not fail to note how great was her concern.

"Then, I must not stay. But, indeed, I could not go without a word with you."

He was striving to formulate the questions he wished to ask.

"I will only trouble you a few moments, Miss Ashton. I've an inquiry or two, and then I will go."

She protested that she did not desire his departure, but only that she feared to have him remain.

"Thank you, though I understood that before. I shall go because I think it best for me. You may wonder at the questions I am going to propound; but rest assured I have good reasons for them."

The nearer he approached the subject, the more difficult did it become.

"Is your father's real name Albert Ashton? and is he really your father? The answer may mean a great deal to both of us!"

Ruth Ashton was somewhat staggered by the directness of these queries, as well as by the statement accompanying them. Yet she replied with simple truthfulness:

"That is his real name, and he is my father!"

This did not serve to enlighten the young man. If Ashton was their name, then the old man could not be John Blessington—and Dwight's father. But he had heard Ashton state that his real name was John Blessington. Here was an irreconcilable difficulty.

"You are sure on that point?" he persisted.

"Where was your father born?"

"In England."

"And you?"

"I was born here in America."

In spite of her desire to conceal the fact, there was intense surprise in her tones. To her, the drift in the questions was amazing. She could not comprehend what Dwight was driving at.

"Did your father have more than one wife or—er—any other children?"

"He has been married twice. Once in England, and once in this country. There was a son born in England, I have understood; and, although I am not sure, I think he died there. I have no brothers or sisters."

Dwight felt that it was fortunate the darkness hid his face, for its workings must have revealed something of his distress and anxiety.

"It is possible that your father bore a different name in England from what he bears here!"

"Yes; it is possible. But I do not think he did. At least, he never said anything to me about it."

Dwight recalled the name, "John Blessington," that he had seen so plainly inscribed on one of the papers in the sheet-iron box. The solution seemed almost clear to him. The man was really Blessington, and had been deceiving his daughter. He, the questioner, was the son born in England, and she the daughter born of a second marriage in America. His father had not obtained a divorce from his mother, but that did not affect the question of Dwight's kinship with the girl. He believed she was by blood his half-sister; and that the old man—his father—had been correct in his charges against the ranchman.

He forgot all about his danger in the tumult of thought that oppressed him. He forgot that he was a hunted man, liable at any moment to be found and dragged forth to a terrible death.

And he was not pleased to find his father—as he had always told himself he would be. His heart was torn and distracted. He could not blot out his great love for this girl. *And she his sister!*

Her show of anxiety in his behalf, and even of timid affection, deeply touched him.

"Now, I must be going!" he said, staggering to his feet and advancing toward the door.

He had come to the sudden determination to go away from there, and remain away forever, if that was necessary to enable him to fight down this feeling.

He came close up to her, boldly placed an arm about her shoulders and kissed her.

"Good-by!" he murmured, holding her for a moment in a close embrace.

Then he turned to depart.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEPARTURE FROM THE RANCH.

He was not permitted to carry out his intention. The voice of the ranchman was heard at the door—the door by which Dwight had entered—and he drew back in alarm.

"Let me in!" Blessington growled, in tones that were harsh and stern.

Dwight and the girl were thrown into a flutter of excitement.

"Where can I go?" Dwight asked. "Isn't there some place where you can hide me until he leaves?"

Ruth Ashton did not reply in words, but turned, and grasping him by the hand, hurried him into a little closet of the room he had just vacated.

"Keep perfectly still!" was her fearful and whispered admonition. "I don't think he will look for you in here."

Then she hastened back, for the ranchman was growling away more furiously than before, at the delay.

Ruth Ashton was perfectly right in believing that Blessington would not look for Park Dwight in the closet. In the first place he had no idea the young man was in the house. And in the second he had come on quite a different errand.

The charges which Albert Ashton brought against him were not calculated to soothe him into restful quiet. At first they had angered him; but when, after Ashton's departure, he began to give them serious thoughts, he became frightened. Should the old man retail that story throughout the country it might do him incalculable harm.

The more he thought of the matter the more nervous he became. He told himself he had been a fool for allowing the old man and the girl to come there after the destruction of their property, when he had already so peremptorily ordered them to remain away. Then he fell to cursing all the ill-luck that had recently attended him; especially pouring out the vials of his wrath on the head of the miserable Shoshone.

At length he could stand it no longer; and descended from his room with the intention of visiting Ashton and forcing him to leave, under threats of the most condign punishment.

"Where is your father?" was his gruff demand, as Ruth Ashton drew the door still further open.

"He isn't here!" she declared.

"Tell that to the marines!" as he noted the tremulousness of her voice and the perturbation of her manner.

Her agitation was caused by the presence there of Park Dwight, though the ranchman gave it a different meaning.

"Indeed, sir, he isn't!" she assured. "He has not been here for some time."

He pushed his way into the room without an invitation to enter.

"I'll take a look around for myself! What are you scared about, girl? I don't intend to hurt him!"

Then Ruth realized that unless she acted in a calmer and more natural manner she would be likely to betray Dwight.

"You can look about as much as you like!" she said, with considerable show of firmness and some defiance. "But I can tell you in advance that you'll not find him here!"

She brought the light from the other room and courageously offered to pilot him over the house. This disconcerted him, and convinced him he was mistaken in his surmise.

"If he is not here, he is not here; and there is no use to look for him!" dropping rudely into a chair, and staring at her. "Has he been talking any queer nonsense to you lately?"

He stretched out his legs and thrust his hands deep into his pockets, assuming as careless and indifferent an attitude as possible.

"I don't know what you mean!" she confessed, in some confusion.

He looked keenly at her to see if she was speaking truthfully.

"You are not lying to me?" he questioned, threateningly. "Hasn't your father been telling any marvelous stories about the wealth he used to possess? Hasn't he ever said that he was once very differently situated?"

Dwight, knowing full well the cause of these mysterious inquiries, was better able to catch the subdued vibrations of murderous anger in the ranchman's words.

"Yes; he has told me that. But not lately!"

"Told you what?"

The girl flushed. Ashton had revealed to her, long ago, some hints that were in line with the charges he had made that night. He had not claimed to her that his name was Blessington,

but had given her indirectly to understand that the Crescent Ranch was once his property, and that he had been swindled out of it. This was what she had referred to when, in an early chapter, she is recorded as speaking of her father's "rights."

"Told me he was once differently situated!" stammering in her confusion.

"How differently?" mercilessly pressing the point.

"Really, Mr. Blessington, I don't know that I have any right to reveal my father's private affairs. I don't think I have."

His features became of fiercer aspect, but he controlled his anger, and only said:

"I think your father is crazier than usual tonight. He has actually charged me with swindling him. Of course, the idea is absurd. Why, ever since I've known him, he has never had anything that I'd want!"

She had no answer for this, and so remained silent.

For a few moments the ranchman sat as if uncertain what further to do or say. Then he arose to leave. He turned at the doorway, and spoke again:

"I hope you have sense enough to know that there can't be any truth in any of his wild yarns. You're not ignorant of the fact that his mind isn't right; and you must bear that in remembrance, when listening to his nonsense."

To her great relief he passed out into the night. She stood hearkening to the sounds of his retreating footsteps until they died away; then came to release Dwight from his prison.

"It's a mighty close place in there!" Dwight declared, mopping his face as he came out. "I don't think I could have stood it much longer. The old scamp! I heard every word he said."

He was on the point of saying more, but checked himself; for at that moment the door was again softly opened, and Ashton glided in.

He stared at Dwight, obviously not having dreamed that the young man might be there; then turned to his daughter.

"I have been under the window!" with a jerk in the direction taken by the ranchman. "He is hunting me, and will do me harm if he finds me. I'm not afraid of him; but my poor girl, I fear for you!"

His tones were inexpressibly tender; and Park Dwight felt irresistibly drawn toward him by this very tenderness.

"Is this my father?" he kept asking himself, over and over.

"I am glad to find you here, sir," turning upon Dwight. "You saw the actions and heard the words of that man. He intends to kill me, if he can find me."

Park mentally acquiesced in this belief.

"Sir!" drawing himself up in his old dramatic fashion, "Let's away from here. And you, my daughter—we will fly! We will fly! Out in the wild woods we can be free—free to breathe the pure air of Heaven, uncontaminated by the presence of such a scoundrel! Yes; we will go away from here—and go now!"

He had begun calmly. Now he seemed to be laboring under intense excitement.

The girl desired to take a number of articles with her in their flight, but this her father would not consent to. It was uncertain where they would go, and therefore unwise to start out with unnecessary burdens.

Dwight shared the old man's impatience to be away. Every moment they remained added to their peril. Blessington might return at any time; the mustangers might come back from their search; or any one of a dozen things might occur that would prove fatal to their half-formed plans.

The lamp was turned out, that its light might not betray them, and the three stole from the building, moving toward the concealment of a timbered gorge some distance away.

A man brushed by them. He was walking rapidly and in the direction of Blessington's house. He stopped and stared at them, as they hurried on.

"Hoo!" he exclaimed: and this exclamation revealed War Eagle, the Shoshone.

"We must change our course!" Dwight whispered. "That Indian is going straight to Blessington. I am sure he recognized us, and they will be after us in a little while!"

The wisdom of this was so manifest that a deviation was made in the line of flight; and again they hastened on.

CHAPTER XX.

BROUGHT BACK.

PARK DWIGHT was correct in his surmise.

The Shoshone was aware of the search then being conducted by the mustangers, and he

went straight to the ranchman with the statement that he had seen the young man and the Ashtons slipping away into the darkness.

Blessington's anger broke out afresh, on receipt of this information. He believed now that Ashton and Dwight were both concealed in the house at the time of his visit to it, and it nettled him to think he had been so completely duped by the girl.

"The hussy!" he hissed, clinching his hands, nervously. "If I had her here, I'd wring her neck! She lied to me most beautifully; and all the time she acted as innocent as an angel. It takes a woman to do a thing of that kind!"

He called to the mustangers whom Dwight had heard conversing near the bunk-house. They were in the house, now, earnestly discussing the charges against Marmaduke and Dwight and the chances of their capture. They were creatures of Blessington's will; and because of this he had kept them there, not knowing but that he might need assistance before the return of the search parties.

They came out; and in hasty sentences he acquainted them with the nature of the Shoshone's discovery.

It required a very few moments for the entire party—there were three of the mustangers—to get ready for a pursuit.

The Shoshone led the way to the place where he had passed the three flying figures; and then, at Blessington's order, continued on in advance, as he was by far the best trailer.

It was so dark they could see very little; but this difficulty the Shoshone overcame in a measure, by getting down on his hands and knees, and feeling with his fingers the imprints of the fugitives' feet.

He reasoned, and reasoned correctly, that they would not continue on in a direct line, after having been seen by him. Hence, he followed their trail in this slow and laborious manner, until a change occurred in its course.

He then arose to his feet, and communicated to the others the extent of his observations.

"And what point are they heading for now?" Blessington anxiously asked.

The Shoshone assured him of his belief that Ashton's party were making for another grove a mile or more to the northward; and, with a hope of overtaking them before they reached it, the chase was resumed.

Park Dwight's words had acted as a stimulus to the fugitives. Fearing the pursuers would soon be on their track, they had traveled as rapidly as was possible.

On this retreat from the ranch Ruth Ashton exhibited many admirable qualities. She was helpful of herself, courageous and cheerful. Her fears were great, both for her father and for Dwight, but she so well succeeded in concealing them that their existence was scarcely suspected.

As for Dwight, even though his mind was so engrossed with the conduct of the flight, thoughts of his anomalous position persistently intruded. The words which Ruth so cheerfully and kindly addressed to him cut like knife-blades.

They had almost gained the grove, when they suddenly became aware of the fact that they were being followed, and that their pursuers were close on their heels.

The Shoshone had so shrewdly and so skillfully led the chase that his party had been able to cover the ground silently, and yet with considerable speed.

"Here! Get in here!" Dwight urged, pushing Ashton on in front of him, to the shelter of some screening bushes.

At the same time he took Ruth by the hand and assisted her to quickly follow.

Their movements were not speedy enough, however. The keen eyes of the Shoshone sighted them as they vanished behind the low scrub.

He pointed out to Blessington and the mustangers the place where Ashton and his companions had disappeared; and, at Blessington's command, the five of them rushed forward with loud shouts, intended to frighten the fugitives from offering any resistance.

In this they were not wholly successful. The ear-piercing yells with which the men came on, sadly frightened the girl; but it had no appreciable effect on Dwight and Ashton. Unfortunately, though, these two had no weapons.

There was a heavy stick or pole lying on the ground; and when the old man saw that further attempts at concealment were useless, he wrenched this in two, exhibiting marvelous strength in the act, and handed one of the clubs thus formed to Dwight.

Blessington's force was on them, now. It seemed wholly useless to fight, and useless to run. Nevertheless, driven by desperation, Dwight

and Ashton wielded the heavy sticks to the best of their ability.

The girl, terrified beyond measure, dashed wildly away, hardly knowing what she was doing, but driven on by a blind desire to escape.

The Shoshone ran after her and caught her by the wrist.

Her alarmed outcry, as she was gripped and jerked backward by the Indian, seemed to transform her father into a demoniac.

With a scream so harsh and frenzied that it could scarcely be thought to issue from a human throat, Ashton rushed upon the ranchman. His club was uplifted, and if the blow he dealt had descended fairly on Blessington's head it would have crushed it like an egg-shell. But, the ranchman saw him coming, and realized his peril. He leaped nimbly aside; and then, darting in before Ashton could recover, caught him about the body.

The struggle that ensued was terrific. Each was possessed of abnormal strength, and they fought as two desert lions might fight on coming together in a death-tussle.

Dwight's resistance was comparatively of short duration. He wielded his club right manfully; but, as two men rushed upon him at the same time, he was soon borne backward and overpowered.

The other mustanger and the Shoshone essayed to rush to Blessington's assistance. They were prevented from giving him any aid by the rapid evolutions of the combatants.

At length Ashton succeeded in freeing himself; and again getting hold of his club, brought it down with crushing force on the ranchman's head and shoulders. Not content with that, but insanely furious from excitement, he repeated the blow again and again, battering the ranchman's body in a fearful manner.

Blessington had fallen prostrate under the first blow; and, when his friends finally succeeded in overpowering the old man and dragging him away, the belief of all was that Blessington was dead.

He lay there without a groan or a movement. However, when they lifted him for the purpose of examining his injuries, they found that he still breathed.

The rage of the men was great; and for a moment they appeared to hesitate as to the proper course to pursue toward Ashton and his associates. Plainly, there was murder in their minds.

Their inclinations in that direction were checked by Blessington's revival. He opened his eyes and tried to sit up.

"I'm pretty badly hurt?" he said, questioningly. "I mean you'd better carry me back to the ranch-house."

At this, a litter was prepared of tree boughs, with some coats stretched across them, and he was placed on this. Two of the men bore the litter, while the others drove the bound prisoners on in advance.

When the ranch buildings were reached, the prisoners were placed in a large room that could be easily guarded. Blessington was delirious; and an earnest consultation was held by his men as to what they should do.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MIX'UP MADE CLEAR.

The movements of Mat Marmaduke have been too long neglected.

When he broke from the bunk room, he ran straight out into the darkness. He did not at first go far, however, but halted to ascertain the fate of Park Dwight.

It was not easy for him to determine this, for Park had crept into the building, while his pursuers had gone on. Marmaduke saw enough, though, to convince him that Dwight had succeeded in getting away. It was useless to hunt for the young man, and there seemed no likelihood they would stumble against each other.

To the Mustanger Detective it was plain that his life would be no longer secure at Crescent Ranch. His opportunities for work there were ended. He felt, too, that he had already secured sufficient evidence to convict the ranchman on a number of criminal charges. True, he had not accomplished the work which brought him there. He was satisfied in his own mind that Park Dwight—or to call him by his true name—Arthur Blessington, was all that he professed to be, and that the ranchman was a scoundrel and a pretender. But he had not secured proof of this—such proof as would convince an intelligent jury.

But he could do no more in that line at the ranch, since this latest turn in the wheel of fortune. Therefore, he resolved to make his way to the nearest town, secure warrants for the

ranchman's apprehension, and return with a force strong enough to take him from the midst of his men.

Having decided on this as the best and only thing to do—and believing that Arthur Blessington was abundantly able to take care of himself—he proceeded as rapidly as possible on his way.

For three hours he tramped straight on, hoping from time to time that he might come on a broken mustang, and so furnish himself with a mount.

Then came one of the greatest surprises of his eventful career. He found himself, almost without warning, in the midst of a large body of horsemen. He had been anticipating pursuit, and listening for it, but his attention had been directed to the rearward instead of forward.

His first thought was that Blessington's men had succeeded in getting in advance of him. But this idea was dissipated, when some of the horsemen sung out to him inquiringly. He knew the voices of every man belonging to Crescent Ranch; and these were not the voices of any of Blessington's mustangers.

He altered his intention to make a run of it, and came forward to where the leader of the party sat on his horse.

The light of a dark lantern was flashed in Marmaduke's face, and the inquiry was made:

"My man, can you direct us to Crescent Ranch? We are a little tangled up in these hills!"

The wary detective would not commit himself until he knew more of the character of these men and their object. A mental sparring match was the result.

"I see you are a little afraid of us," said the leader. "We have no hesitancy about revealing ourselves, for you are now in our power and cannot harm us. We shall make you show us the way to this ranch! The time was when I should not have needed a guide."

The light from the lantern was so shifted that Mat Marmaduke got a good view of the speaker's face. He saw before him a man of about fifty years of age, whose address was dignified, and yet in whose face care and suffering and sorrow had plowed deep furrows.

"I am the rightful owner of Crescent Ranch. My name is John Blessington. I understand there is another John Blessington in possession of the property, and I am on my way to seek an interview with him!"

Marmaduke was so amazed that he had no words in reply. He could only stare blankly at the one who had addressed him.

Although it had come with the suddenness of an electric shock, he could not doubt that he saw before him the genuine John Blessington. To search for this man was one of the things he had expected to devote himself when he had succeeded in securing the arrest and punishment of the pretender. All that was now rendered unnecessary.

The Mustanger Detective promptly revealed his own identity, explaining why and how he had come to the ranch, and at whose solicitation.

This called for a series of explanations from Blessington—for Marmaduke, though the need seemed pressing, felt that he could not go on until he had first heard something of the causes of the man's absenteeism.

The knowledge that his son, Arthur, was in hiding near the ranch, had a marked effect on Blessington, and he was anxious to proceed at once, but he told the story that Marmaduke desired to hear, as they rode forward—the detective having been mounted behind one of the men.

In many respects it was a marvelous story. A few years after establishing Crescent Ranch, Blessington became imbued with a desire to return to England, for the purpose of revisiting his wife and son—for time had assuaged the bitterness which had produced the separation.

He left the ranch in charge of one Philip Creston, and, for the purpose of abbreviating this narrative, it may be stated at once that Philip Creston was the man who has been known to the reader as John Blessington, the ranchman.

On landing in England, Blessington had been foully dealt with. He had fallen in with a gang of the thugs and thieves which so plentifully abound in the world's capital city. He was drugged and robbed; and to cover up their crime, the men who had so treated him had him arrested under a false charge, and under a false name. The effect of the drug administered for a time almost ruined his intellect, and in a great measure blotted out his memory of past events.

He was convicted on the charge trumped up against him, and sentenced to a long term of im-

prisonment in the British penal colony in Australia. When he recovered his mental faculties, he made application to those in authority looking to his release. But he could do nothing. They would not believe his story.

And so the dreary years linked themselves monotonously, and life became a burden which he would gladly have laid down.

Finally, the long-watched-for opportunity to escape presented itself. With a companion, he set out through the wilderness that lay about the penal settlement, heading in a northerly direction, and after hardships incredible, succeeded in reaching the coast.

Here they waited for months for a ship to take them off. It came at last—an American vessel—and by a roundabout voyage they eventually reached England.

He found his wife dead and his son absent in America, supposedly searching for him. He had not tarried in England, on making these discoveries, but had hastened at once to this country.

At the railway town nearest Crescent Ranch, he had, by careful inquiry, learned of the present condition of his property and of the fact that it was held and claimed by a false John Blessington. He had immediately laid the facts and his proofs before the proper officials; and now, with this escort, was coming to claim his own and mete out punishment to the man who had so wronged him.

The journey to the ranch was made as speedily as possible; and on arriving there, at Marmaduke's suggestion, the buildings were surrounded.

One of the searching parties under Pinto Bill had arrived only a short time before. At this show of force and when commanded to surrender, Pinto and his guilty partners endeavored to seek safety in flight. A hot and running fight ensued, in which Pinto and a few others as guilty as he, met their deaths.

Philip Creston, the false John Blessington, was found to be in a dying condition, when the real John Blessington thus took forcible possession of the place. But he revived sufficiently to recognize the man he had so cruelly injured, and with his dying breath to confess his crime and crave forgiveness.

A few further words and we reach the end.

Albert Ashton knew something of the wrong done by Philip Creston. Creston had mistreated him, also, by swindling him out of an interest in a silver mine; and the old man, getting the two wrongs mixed up in his disordered mind, bad, at various times, conceived the idea that he was John Blessington and the ranch had been taken from him. This was his mental state when he so boldly accused Creston. The paper which Arthur Blessington saw in the sheet-iron box, containing the name of John Blessington, was nothing more than a letter which the pretender had once addressed to Ashton.

On some money saved out of the wreck of the fortune he once possessed, Ashton and his daughter had lived; and, not unmindful of the benefits of an education, he had, long before the opening of this story, permitted her to avail herself of a number of years of schooling in an Eastern city.

After Creston's death, John Blessington entered into undisputed possession of his own. He did not return to England, but settled down on the ranch near Crescent Butte.

Arthur Blessington soon after married Ruth Ashton, the girl of his choice. He was, by his father's favor, admitted into full partnership, and given control of the active work of the ranch; and it is hardly necessary to say that affairs prospered in his hands. Albert Ashton dwelt with his daughter, on the ranch; and, a few years after the marriage, died there. The mental cloud never quite passed from him, though he became much better in that respect with the coming of more peaceful times.

The ranch is still one of the most prosperous in the Wind River Range, though it has changed its character, and is now devoted to the breeding and rearing of high-grade horses, instead of to the capture and breaking of wild mustangs.

Pope Dresden, and War Eagle, the Shoshone, have long since passed to the silent majority. Dresden was killed in a drunken brawl, and the Shoshone ended his earthly career by a too free indulgence in liquid lightning—the white man's bane but the Indian's curse.

As for Mat Marmaduke, the one-time Mustanger Detective, he acknowledged no firmer nor truer friends than the Blessingtons of Crescent Ranch. He is not an infrequent visitor there; and at such times the conversation invariably drifts to the subject of the Great Mix-Up.

THE END.

Broadway Billy's Novel Case!

Broadway Billy's Bargain;

OR,

The Three Detectives in Denver.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BROADWAY BILLY SUMMONED.

BILLY WESTON, "Broadway Billy," and his pard, Skinny—now grown almost into the proportions of an exhibition fat boy—and Old Roger the ranger;—that was the trio resting at their ease in a Denver hotel. Billy, after chaffing Skinny about his fat, and stirring his wise young ex-street gamin pard up considerably by his badinage, finally "settled down to business," when a letter was put in his hand from the leading detective in Denver, asking his aid in a somewhat peculiar and baffling case.

The badinage at once ceased. A case that had baffled the Denver detectives—that was the noted New York "delegate's" opportunity, and he promptly decided to tackle it. So the three—the detective trio—started at once for the headquarters of Brandland, the great Denver Hawkshaw. They found this gentleman alone. He greeted them cordially, for Billy's performances in the detective way, in the capital of Colorado, had made him a notability.

"You got my note, Mr. Weston?" asked Brandland, as they entered.

"That's what has brought me here," assured Billy. "Let me introduce my two partners, Mr. James Callahan, commonly called Skinny; and Mr. Roger Watts."

"Introduction is unnecessary," waived the detective, while at the same time he acknowledged it by shaking hands with them, "for the papers have introduced you only too well."

When all were seated, Billy announced that he was ready to hear what was wanted of him.

"You are ready for the case, are you?" observed Mr. Brandland, a smile playing upon his lips.

"That's what we're here for," Billy assured. "We're the triangle from the East, ready to tackle anything that falls in our way."

"Anything?" with the smile broadening.

"Yes; anything that don't require a weak-kneed detective with mush and milk in his head in place of brains."

"Well, I won't ask you to promise you will take this case up; you have heard what it is. I will give you a fair chance to refuse."

"All right; it isn't often we throw anything over our shoulders when there's fame and fortune at stake—particularly the latter."

"There's a thousand dollars for you in this case if you win it."

"Then we're the Bayards from New York to tackle it. Give us the business end of it and we'll take hold. What is this racket?"

"That's what's the matter, what is it?" urged Skinny.

"Hal is the fever comin' on ye, Skinny?"

"If you can't call me by my right name in company, don't address me at all," demurred Skinny, with an air of injured dignity.

"Dear me, that boy is the nightmare of my existence!" sighed Billy. "You see he is getting fat, Mr. Brandland, and the fatter he gets the more particular he becomes. Before long he'll want me to call him Count, or Duke, or somethin' like that."

"But, let's hear what this thing is," put in the old ranger. "I am interested in it myself."

"That's what I like to see," acknowledged Billy. "You see, Mr. Brandland, my two partners are eager to get at it, and that's a sure sign we're going to win the prize. Now set your mill-a-going and unwind the thing to us. We're all attention and ready to hear it."

"Very well, here you are, then: In this city lives an old codger named Selim Mudgeon. He is rich, but as miserly as he can be. He is really too stingy to eat three square meals a day. He is the man who has this case I want to get rid of, and who offers a thousand dollars to the man who will clear it up for him. He wanted me to take his case. I didn't want it but he hung on so that I took it, more to get rid of him than anything else. He didn't pay me anything down, but I have his written agreement that he

is to pay me one thousand dollars cash upon the recovery of his stolen property."

"Ha! then it's a case of stolen goods, is it?"

The detective laughed.

"You could never guess it," he assumed. "He has met with a great loss, but not the loss of his money. You see Selim Mudgeon is a cripple—that is to say, he is minus a leg. He used to wear a common wooden leg, but of late he has been going without any. The fact of the business is, his wooden leg has been stolen from him, and it is for the recovery of that useful article that he offers the big reward!"

"A thousand dollars for a wooden leg?"

"Yes; and that a battered old stump that wasn't worth a quarter."

"See here," Billy cried, "are you trying to guy me?"

"I thought you would suspect that," was the detective's response, "but on my word of honor I am not."

"Well, I'll take you at your word. If you have picked me up for a flat, though, you may be glad to drop me for a sharp before you are done with me."

"You are no chump, Billy Weston, as I am well aware. I am not trying to impose upon you. What I have told you is the simple truth. The police won't have anything to do with old Mudgeon and his case, and neither would I until he had pledged himself for the thousand dollars."

"He must value the old peg, I should say."

"He seems to, and that's the fact. I put one of my men on it for a day or two, but we have been so busy since that I have not been able to spare him, and so this case has suffered. The old cove comes every day, however, to see how I am making out. Now, you have nothing to do, I take it, and are ripe for anything that promises fun and excitement, so I thought perhaps you would enjoy taking hold of the old rascal's odd case and giving it a turn."

"You call him an old rascal; is that what he is?"

"Well, I don't know anything to his damage in a criminal way, but I wouldn't trust him out of range, just the same."

Broadway Billy was beginning to be interested in the matter. "He comes here every day!" he questioned.

"Yes; and it is about time for him to put in an appearance now. If you decide to take the case, I will get it for you when he comes."

"I'll take it."

"That settles it. Now, when he comes, you must be here alone with me, and your partners can retire into that closet yonder. He won't talk if there are too many to hear."

"All right. Skinny and Rover, you hear what the plan is."

"Yes, we hear," responded Skinny. "If you want to go hunting around after old wooden legs, you can, but I'm not in it."

"There, there, now, Fatty, you know you are blowing. You are jest crazy to get at the bottom of the old miser's mystery, and so am I. You'll be in it, when the ball begins to roll lively and the smoke begins to appear."

"I don't deny but I'm in it already," declared the old ranger. "I want ter know what he is so mighty anxious about an old wooden leg fer. A thousand dollars is a big price for a stump, I should say, when we kin get another fer an X."

"There is a mystery behind it all, as you suspect," spoke up the detective, "although I have no idea what it can be. I have had no time to devote to it, you see, and it has been a bore to me, anyhow. But, it is time the old fellow was here, and you two had better get into the closet."

So, Skinny and the ranger went into the closet and drew the door almost to a close, as the detective directed.

"Now," said Brandland to Billy, "let me give you your cue. I will explain to the old fellow that I can't do any more for him in the matter, and will refer him to you. He will want to know all about you, and I'll tell him all he needs to know."

"Yes; and what then?"

"Well, he may turn right to you and take you to his bosom, so to say, or he may storm at me. It will depend upon his mood. But, as a proof of his meanness, you get him to make you an offer for the recovery of the leg. Don't forget that he has already bound himself to pay me a thousand dollars."

"All right; I guess I catch on."

"Of course you do. And, by the way, you are a shrewd one, and if you should find his old stump, don't deliver it until you get your money

in hand. If it is worth a cool thousand to him, it is worth that to you. Don't let him get the best of you in the deal. But, the chances are that it won't be found."

"I'm of the same opinion; but if he regards that leg so highly, it must have some particular value, and maybe that's the reason it was taken. It is worth looking into, I believe, and I'll take a—"

"Sh! He is coming now."

A thumping and clicking was heard in the hall without, and pretty soon the door opened and a wretched-looking mortal entered the room.

He was a man with one leg, the leg of the trowser being pinned up behind to form something like a bag. He was wretchedly clad, and looked more like a mendicant than a rich miser.

He was about sixty-five years old, and might have been judged even older than that. Hair and beard were long and tangled; he wore a pair of the commonest steel-bow glasses, and supported himself with a pair of rough homemade crutches which were anything but mates.

Ducking his head to the detective, he cast a searching look at Billy.

"Good-morning, Mr. Mudgeon!" the detective greeted.

"Good-morning, Mr. Brandland!" was the echo. "Anything to tell me by this time?"

"I have no news for you, sir," was the answer; "but come in and sit down and I will talk with you. I have a proposition to make to you, Mr. Mudgeon."

In the rest of this unique story of the Denver adventures of Broadway Billy and his two pards, the reader will have a capital treat. It is, in truth, a "peculiar case"—the hunt for a wooden leg, but that the leg has a history and value of its own will be readily guessed, else the old miser would not give such a big sum for its recovery. In what that value consists the climax will reveal. Everybody will enjoy the "yarn" immensely. See Beadle's Half-Dime Library, No. 762.

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